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Allegiances

ASHCLAN

LEADER Goldenstar- Golden brown she-cat with green eyes

DEPUTY Ivyheart- Gray tabby she-cat with green eyes

MEDICINE CATS Featherstorm- Gray she-cat with amber eyes

Eagleclaw- Brown tabby tom with sharp amber eyes.

WARRIORS *(toms and she-cats without kits)*

Robinflight- Ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes
Apprentice, Hollypaw

Graywillow- Long furred, gray she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Mousepaw

Berryleaf- Tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Hazelpaw

Dustclaw- Pale brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Ripplestep- Black tom with yellow eyes

Cinderflower- Dark gray she-cat with amber eyes
Apprentice, Cloverpaw

Jayclaw- Dark gray tabby tom
Apprentice, Lionpaw

Tawnyfrost- Dappled brown she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Rainpaw

Owlstorm- Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Scorchlight- Ginger tom with green eyes

Ravenfur- Black she-cat with yellow eyes

Silverstripe- Silver tabby tom with yellow eyes

Duskwhisker- Cream colored she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Mudpaw

Gorsestrike- Dark gray tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Spiderpaw

Roseclaw- Ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes

Sharptongue- Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

APPRENTICES *(six moons old, in training to be warriors)*

Lionpaw- Dark golden tom with green eyes (Son of Goldenstar and Scorchlight)

Hazelpaw- Ginger she-cat with amber eyes. (Daughter of Goldenstar and Scorchlight)

Mudpaw- Dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes (Son of Tawnyfrost and Owlstorm)

Cloverpaw- Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Tawnyfrost and Owlstorm)

Rainpaw- Gray tabby she-cat with white paws and blue eyes (Daughter of Graywillow and Silverstripe)

Hollypaw- Black and white she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Berryleaf and Ripplestep)

Mousepaw- Brown tom with green eyes (Son of Berryleaf and Ripplestep)

Spiderpaw- Black and brown she-cat with yellow eyes (Daughter of Berryleaf and Ripplestep)

QUEENS *(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)*

Mistypool- Silver she-cat with white chest and paws and blue eyes, nursing Jayflight's kits (Echokit, gray tabby she-cat with green eyes, Riverkit, blue-gray she-cat with blue eyes and Moonkit, silver and black tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Heatherstorm- Light gray she-cat with soft blue eyes, nursing Gorsestrike's kits (Lilykit, gray tabby she-cat with green eyes and Graykit, dark gray tom with amber eyes)

ELDERS *(former warriors and queens, now retired)*

Cinderclaw- Gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Sandnose- Pale ginger she-cat with green eyes

SUNCLAN

LEADER Foxstar -Ginger tom with white paws

DEPUTY Mallownose- Pale gray she-cat

MEDICINE CAT Feathernose - Soft silver tabby tom
Apprentice, Honeypaw

WARRIORS Hawktalon- Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Falconclaw- Dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Owlfoot- Pale brown tom with darker paws

Marshpelt- Dark brown she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Sunpaw

Firetail- Ginger she-cat with green eyes

Leafwhisker- brown she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Sandpaw

Stonewhisker- Gray tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Applepaw

Moonfur- Cream colored she-cat with blue eyes

Brightclaw- Golden tom with green eyes
Apprentice, Cloudpaw

Rockfall- Gray tom with amber eyes

APPRENTICES

Honeypaw- Golden she-cat with green eyes (Leafwhisker and Brightclaw's daughter)

Sunpaw- Golden she-cat with green eyes (Leafwhisker and Brightclaw's daughter)

Sandpaw- Tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes and light ginger paws (Owlfoot and Firetail's daughter)

Applepaw- Tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes (Owlfoot and Firetail's daughter)

Cloudpaw-White she-cat with blue eyes (Mallownose's and Rockfall's daughter)

QUEENS

Nightwing- black she-cat with blue eyes, nursing Hawktalon's kits (Crowkit, black she-kit with blue eyes; Rainkit, black she-kit with white ears and blue eyes; Tigerkit, dark brown tom with pale tabby stripes; Bramblekit, dark brown tabby tom and Thornkit, pale brown tabby top with spiky fur)

Dovewish- gray she-cat with blue eyes, nursing Stormwhisker's kits (Flowerkit, pale she-kit with green eyes and Stormkit- gray she-cat with lighter paws and blue eyes)

ELDERS

Fishtail- Elderly silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes

MOONCLAN

LEADER Owlstar- Fluffy white tom with blue eyes.

DEPUTY Cloudwind- Gray and white she-cat with blue eyes

MEDICINE CAT Skyclaw- Gray tom with yellow eyes

WARRIORS

Ashbird- Gray she-cat with black specks and blue eyes

Whiteriver- White she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Cinderpaw

Ivystone- Gray tabby she-cat with green eyes

Stonefoot- Large, gray tom with amber eyes

Thorntalon- Brown tabby tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Breezepaw

Snakepelt- Gray tom with yellow eyes
Apprentice, Shadowpaw

Smokeleaf- Gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Icepaw

Sootmask- Black tom with white markings and amber eyes
Apprentice, Frostpaw

Windsong- Light gray she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Cedarpaw

Silverpool- Silver tabby she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Crowpaw

Driftwater- Brown tom with amber eyes

Squirrelpelt- Ginger she-cat with green eyes

Spidertail- Black tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Amberpaw

Riverlight- Black she-cat with blue eyes

Blossomfrost- Light gray she-cat with blue eyes

APPRENTICES

Amberpaw- Golden brown and white she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Squirrelpelt and Thorntalon)

Cedarpaw- Brown tom with amber eyes (Son of Squirrelpelt and Thorntalon)

Shadowpaw- Dark gray tom with amber eyes (Son of Ashbird and Spidertail)

Breezepaw- Black she-cat with blue eyes (Daughter of Ashbird and Spidertail)

Cinderpaw- Gray she-cat with amber eyes (Daughter of Ashbird and Spidertail)

Crowpaw- Black tom with white markings and blue eyes (Son of Riverlight and Blacksky)

Icepaw- Pure white she-cat with blue eyes (Daughter of Owlstar and Blossomfrost)

Frostpaw- White, spotted tabby she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Owlstar and Blossomfrost)

QUEENS

Featherdawn- White she-cat with gray markings and blue eyes, nursing Sootmask's kits. (Badgerkit, black tom with amber eyes, Nightkit, black she-cat with amber eyes and Dovekit, white she-cat with blue eyes)

ELDERS

Runningpath- Lean, brown tom with amber eyes

Berryfrost- White she-cat with blue eyes

Haretooth- Brown tom with amber eyes

Ravenfall- Black she-cat with green eyes

LICHENCLAN

LEADER Birdstar - Elderly brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

DEPUTY Jumpheart- Golden brown tabby tom with green eyes

MEDICINE CAT Sagefeather- Fluffy gray she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Stormpaw

WARRIORS

Feathercloud - Soft gray and white she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Sparrowpaw

Patchfoot- White and brown tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Badgerpaw

Hareclaw- Brown tom with green eyes
Apprentice, Jaggedpaw

Sunstorm- Golden tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Daisypaw

Rowanfang- Dark brown tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Fieldpaw

Krestleflame- Golden brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Cedercloud- Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes|
Apprentice, Maplepaw

Poppywing- Black and brown she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Hazelpaw

Ashstream- Dark gray she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Gingerpaw

Amberflame- Ginger she-cat with amber eyes
Apprentice, Vinepaw

Breezefall- Pale brown tom with amber eyes

Mothflame- Dappled gray she-cat with blue eyes

Skytail- Gray tabby tom with green eyes
Apprenitce, Elmpaw

APPRENTICES

Stormpaw- Gray she-cat with blue eyes (Daughter of Feathercloud and Skytail)

Daisypaw- Pale gray she-cat with blue eyes (Daughter of Feathercloud and Skytail)

Badgerpaw- Black and white tom with amber eyes (Son of Feathercloud and Skytail)

Vinepaw- Brown she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Cedercloud and Patchfoot)

Sparrowpaw- Brown and black tabby tom with amber eyes (Son of Cedercloud and Patchfoot)

Hazelpaw- Brown she-cat with amber eyes (Daughter of Cedercloud and Patchfoot)

Fieldpaw- Light golden-brown tom (Son of Krestleflame and Hareclaw)

Gingerpaw- Ginger she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Krestleflame and Hareclaw)

Jaggedpaw- Red-brown tom with amber eyes (Son of Fawnsky and Sunstorm)

Maplepaw- Golden brown she-cat with white paws and green eyes (Daughter of Fawnsky and Maplestorm)

Elmpaw- Brown tom with amber eyes (Son of Mosswing and Rowanfang)

ELDERS

Tigercloud- Brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Dustfang- Pale brown tom with green eyes

Rockflower- Gray she-cat with blue eyes

Prologue

The sky was dark, the moon nearly hidden by dark clouds. A thick fog of dread hung across the cats of AshClan, filling them with fear and uncerity. In the heart of this fog was AshClan's medicine cat, Moonwhisker. She stayed in her den most days, doing everything she could just to keep her Clanmates healthy, even if she was rarely allowed to. Over the past several moons, AshClan had gone through a lot.

Moonwhisker's sister and AshClan, Echoheart, had led an assault on AshClan without the permission of Lionstar. The entire situation had shocked Moonwhisker, her sister had never shown that much violence before. She had proven herself to be an honorable deputy but that left Moonwhisker terrified.

Long ago when she was just an apprentice, Moonwhisker had received a prophecy warning her that one of her sisters would follow a dark path that led to violence and bloodshed. For the longest time Moonwhisker had assumed that it would've been Riverstorm, her other sister had been arrogant and quick to fight.

As Riverstorm grew up, however, she experienced a lot of tragedy that helped to mature her and help her see the bigger picture. Then Moonwhisker had been concerned it was Echoheart, but she never had any reason to fear for her sister. Moonwhisker had thought that she successfully prevented the prophecy, until that day.

Moonwhisker hated herself for not realizing that she had been warned about Echoheart, Echoheart was the one she needed to help. She hadn't been there for her, and now she was following a dark path of violence and bloodshed.

After Echoheart's assault, her deputy status had been revoked and Riverstorm had been named deputy in her place. Echoheart from that moment forward had become even more cold, she isolated herself and wouldn't speak to her Clanmates. Moonwhisker had tried, but Echoheart refused to listen to her. She wouldn't listen to

anyone.

Then came the day that changed AshClan forever, Thornpelt of SunClan showed up to AshClan camp. His pelt torn and bloody, fear in his eyes. He came to Lionstar and told a story of how Flowerstar had led her warriors to attack him and drive him out, he had tried to defend his Clanmates but they had all attacked him. Moonwhisker didn't believe him, she knew what kind of cat Flowerstar was and it wasn't that.

However, Lionstar had a generous heart and welcomed Thornpelt into their home. This would be his final, fatal mistake. After about a moon one day Thornpelt dragged Lionstar's body back to camp, both of them covered in blood and Thornpelt explained that they had been attacked by a band of rogues and Lionstar had lost the battle and his final life.

Riverstorm had been completely distraught and Thornpelt deemed her unfit to lead, he convinced AshClan that StarClan had chosen him to be the next leader, and Echoheart backed him up. He refused Moonwhisker to accompany him on his journey to the Moonstone, and he named Echoheart his deputy.

When Moonwhisker was preparing Lionstar's body vigil, she found pale brown fur in his claws, fur that matched Thornstar. She knew the truth, and Thornstar knew it as well. He hadn't directly threatened her, but he had done enough. "Remember, Moonwhisker. Medicine cats aren't gifted for speaking, they are gifted for healing. Otherwise, you may find yourself in a dangerous situation." It had been enough of a threat for Moonwhisker to stay silent, no one else knew until she told Riverstorm.

Riverstorm knew the truth, but she knew that together the two of them couldn't bring down Thornstar as well as Echoheart. Moonwhisker was terrified for her Clanmates, and things only continued to get worse.

Echoheart started expecting kits and just a moon prior gave birth to Nightkit and Blackkit. She didn't spend any time with them however, she would feed them but that was it. They slept alone in the nursery, they also weren't Thornstar's like she wanted. They

were Crowfoot's, she had manipulated him into believing that she cared about him. She only wanted kits to appease Thornstar and build his Clan.

Moonwhisker had never seen her sister so blinded, she was completely obsessed with Thornstar. She did whatever he asked, he manipulated her all the same. Thornstar also continued breaking the warrior code by stealing his three kits from SunClan and making them apprentices at only five moons old, he had done the same with Lilyclaw's three kits.

Moonwhisker felt lost every single day, unsure of how she could help her Clan. Thornstar forbid her from going to the moonstone on the half-moon, she was cut off from her ancestors, Thornstar also wouldn't let her heal wounds, she wasn't a medicine cat, she was a prisoner. There were other cats in the Clan who didn't follow Thornstar, along with RIverstorm there was Silvermoon, Ashblaze, Stormheart, Lilyclaw and Haresong. Even if they all banded together, they couldn't overthrow a leader with nine lives as well as Echoheart and the other warriors that followed.

Moonwhisker knew they needed help, and she knew that SunClan would be the ones to do it. They knew the true reason why Thornstar was exiled, and she knew that Flowerstar would help to drive him out and restore peace to AshClan, but the struggle was getting there. SunClan had led an attack on AshClan after Thornstar stole the kits, which was a battle SunClan lost. There was nothing they could do right now.

I need to get out of this den. Moonwhisker's thoughts were creating a violent storm in her mind and she needed fresh air, she was allowed to gather herbs as long as she didn't go too far. She was usually aware that she was being watched by the warriors that pledged their loyalty to Thornstar such as Ratpelt.

Moonwhisker stepped out of her den, shuddering at the sight of her camp. Prey bones were scattered across camp and it reeked of crowfood. There was no cleaning done, only training and hunting. Moonwhisker did her best to avoid drawing any attention and she padded away into the pine trees. These pine trees once made her feel so safe and at home, but now they felt like a suffocating trap.

"Oh, Eagleclaw..." She muttered to herself. "What would you do?" She missed her mentor, it had been painful watching him die to the illness he had spent several moons battling. He had taught her so much, even though he wore a pelt of thorns. She drug her paws through the forest, trying to sniff for marigold or anything of use.

Moonwhisker padded for a little bit, sitting down at a collection of the golden flower and started picking the herb. After a few moments she heard pawsteps and jumped up in alarm. Through the shadows of the pine trees stepped Riverstorm, her blue-gray pelt dull and her blue eyes darkened by grief, she had never truly gotten over Lionstar's death or what caused it. Riverstorm had been one of the most loyal warriors that Moonwhisker ever knew, her pride in AshClan is what made her such a strong warrior. *And seeing our Clan like this...*

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." Riverstorm dipped her head, sitting down beside Moonwhisker.

"It's okay." Moonwhisker sighed, staring at the marigold. "Everything scares me these days."

"I understand." Riverstorm lowered her voice. "I checked and it didn't seem like anyone followed us." Moonwhisker turned to her in concern. "I've talked to some of the others, and we want to flee to SunClan. We need to get away from Thornstar if we ever have a chance at driving him out."

"Who all agreed?"

"Silvermoon, Lilyclaw and Haresong. Stormheart, Ashblaze and Wheatwhisker all agreed to stay behind. Lilyclaw and Wheatwhisker didn't want to risk their kits, so Wheatwhisker is going to stay behind and make sure they're safe. We need you to come as well."

Moonwhisker stared at her sister, she wanted them all to be safe and she hated her Clan but..."I can't." Moonwhisker mewed sadly, turning away.

"What do you mean?" Riverstorm stared at her.

"I'm AshClan's medicine cat, I took a vow to care for my Clanmates no matter what. They need me more than ever right now, I don't have an apprentice and I have to be there to care for my Clanmates when they need it. Not to mention I have to make sure that Blackkit and Nightkit are okay, they're barely being fed as it is."

Riverstorm's eyes darkened further. "I understand, Moonwhisker." Riverstorm mewed sadly and rose to her paws, glancing up at the darkening sky. "We'll get SunClan to help us, and we will drive Thornstar out. We *will* reclaim AshClan and I will come back for you, I promise." She leaned forward, touching her muzzle to Moonwhisker's. "We're leaving soon, I have to be prepared."

"Keep them safe." Moonwhisker told her sister, feeling sadness swell up inside of her.

"Keep yourself safe." Riverstorm's eyes trembled. "I'll see you again soon, I promise." Riverstorm turned away, vanishing into the woods and Moonwhisker stared after her, part of her wanting to run after. *I can't. My Clan needs me right now.*

Moonwhisker finished gathering the marigold and picked up the bundle of golden leaves before rising to her paws and heading back to camp. She was about halfway back when she caught the scent of Echoheart. She froze in place, nearly dropping her herb bundle.

A few moments later, her sister appeared. "Good evening, Moonwhisker." She said, her murky green eyes filled with suspicion. *I've done nothing wrong.* Moonwhisker reminded herself. *I shouldn't be scared of my own sister.* Moonwhisker set down the marigold.

"Hello, Echoheart." She greeted, forcing her voice to stay steady.

"You're out late." Echoheart took a step froward, the tip of her tail twitching.

"Just collecting some marigold." Moonwhisker blinked, remaining calm.

"You haven't seen...Riverstorm have you?" Echoheart tilted her head, turning Moonwhisker's blood cold. *She doesn't know.*

Riverstorm said no one followed them. "I haven't, do you need her for something."

Echoheart let out a cold chuckle, chilling Moonwhisker's bones. "I do, and its cute that you're trying to lie but you've never been a good liar Moonwhisker." Moonwhisker's ears flattened. "I know *exactly* what's going on. I know *everything* that goes on this Clan, I know that she, Silvermoon, Lilyclaw and Haresong are all planning on running away tonight and while I could chase them down and punish them, I have a better idea."

Echoheart's claws extended forward, glinting in the pale light of the falling sun, and digging into the earth beneath her paws. Moonwhisker's chest tightened. *She wouldn't hurt me. Echoheart wouldn't hurt me.*

"For a long time I've wanted to do this to Riverstorm, I've always wanted to claw the arrogance off her face but I never had a chance. She was my Clanmate, my *sister.* But was she really my sister? Or did she neglect me, *ignore* me and treat me less than crowfood?" Echoheart started slowly circling Moonwhisker, her heart began to pound painfully in her chest as fear fogged her brain.

"Riverstorm has always been selfish and arrogant but you were always kind." Her tone was filled with malice. "You were always he the kind one, the gentle one, soft as a baby bird, right?" Echoheart stepped even closer, anger filling her eyes. "But you ignored me too, you *always* focused on your medicine cat duties and nothing else." She stopped herself, letting out a low sigh. "But I can't really blame you for that can I? I did push everyone away, maybe we weren't close as sisters but you are a good medicine cat, I'll give you that much." Her tail waved. "So don't take what I'm about to do personally, but as a message to Riverstorm. I can't wait to see the look of despair in her eyes when I tell her what I did.

"She'll be so broken inside, and then--only then, will I kill Riverstorm myself. I've been longing to feel my claws rip through her pelt so I can inflict the pain that she made me feel for *seasons.*"

Echoheart met Moonwhisker's gaze, it was dark, empty and full of pain and hatred. Moonwhisker understood now. *She's going to kill*

me. Without thinking, Moonwhisker turned and started sprinting away from her sister as fast she she could. She needed to find Riverstorm, she had to get away.

Moonwhisker's paws beat heavily against the forest floor, kicking up pine needles as she ran for her life. Her blood roared in her ears and her heart pounded painfully. She could hear loud pawsteps behind her as Echoheart gave chase. Moonwhisker was smaller than Echoheart, but Echoheart was a trained warrior. Moonwhisker had to run as fast as she could, because she wouldn't win in a fight.

Moonwhisker could see the SunClan border in the distance, if she could just cross it and find help...as the thought crossed her mind, Moonwhisker felt a burning string as claws sank into her haunches, pulling her down to the ground. She felt one of her hind legs twist painfully behind her, cracking as Echoheart dragged her to the ground.

Moonwhisker yowled in pain, the two of them skidding across the forest floor. She had no choice now, she had to fight. Moonwhisker lashed out at Echoheart, she felt her claws connect with her sister's pelt but they tore through weekly. Echoheart let out a laugh and raked her claws down Moonwhisker' side, sending blood splatters across the ground.

"You gave a good run." Echoheart laughed, her eyes had changed completely. They were crazed, filled with nothing but bloodlust. "But a medicine cat like you could never beat a warrior like me. Echoheart sank her claws into Moonwhisker's shoulders and flipped her onto her back, pinning her down by her throat.

Moonwhisker choked, desperately trying to move as Echoheart kept her trapped to the ground. Echoheart's claws pressed against Moonwhisker's throat, drawing small amounts of blood. She began to panic as she locked eyes with her sister. *This isn't real. StarClan help me!*

"I'm sorry it had to be this way, Moonwhisker." Echoheart laughed, her voice deep and manic. "You were really were a good medicine cat, but Riverstorm needs to *suffer.* At least you'll see her soon."

"Please--" Moonwhisker managed to choke out, the pain of Echoheart crushing her windpipe was almost too much to bare. "Don't--do--this."

Echoheart's eyes didn't change, this wasn't Moonwhisker's sister, this wasn't the young apprentice who wanted nothing more than to serve her Clan. This was a monster, she was following the dark path that Featherstorm had warned her about. *I'm sorry, Featherstorm. I'm sorry, AshClan.*

"Goodbye, sister." Echoheart's claws sank deep into Moonwhisker's neck and she violently ripped them to the side, tearing through her flesh. Moonwhisker let out a silent wail, her mouth open in shock as she felt her life fading away. It didn't hurt, all she could see was Echoheart's crazed eyes as she drifted away with only one thought in her mind. *I failed you all.*

Chapter 1

"*Take all your weight onto* your haunches." Jayclaw instructed, placing his paw gently on Riverkit's back. "When you do this, your paws won't make any sound." She focused intently, taking a hesitant paw step forward, it was nearly silent. "When you get close enough to your prey, then you pounce and kill it."

Riverkit crept forward, focusing on her "prey" which was a small pebble. She inched closer, soon leaping and taking the stone in her paws with ease. Beside her, two other kits jumped and she looked over to see her sisters, Moonkit and Echokit jumping towards their own stone.

Moonkit's skidded ahead of her, out of her grasp and Echokit kicked up a flurry of dust and pine needles as she stumbled forward. "Riverkit, that was excellent." Jayclaw purred, brushing his tail over Riverkit's shoulders. "Moonkit, you jumped to soon and Echokit your weight wasn't balanced properly." Riverkit held her head high, proud of herself for hunting so well and gaining her father's approval, she would be the best warrior in all of AshClan!

"Aren't they a little young for this kind of training?" Came a kind purr from behind the kits in the nursery. Riverkit looked over her shoulder to see the kind blue eyes of her mother, Mistypool.

"No cat is ever too young to start training." Jayclaw held his head high. "I want my kits to be as advanced as Mudpaw and Cloverpaw when they turn six moons. There's no such thing as "too good" of a hunter, my dear."

"Of course not." Mistypool rested her chin on her paws, letting out a happy chuckle. "They will certainly be the best warriors."

Pride swelled in Riverkit's chest, she looked at her sisters who didn't look as proud. Moonkit was staring into the camp and Echokit was licking dust from her gray fur with annoyance twitching in her tail. Riverkit turned to face her father. "I'm want to be leader someday."

She proclaimed, enjoying the prideful glow in her father's eyes.

"I'm sure you will." Jayclaw nudged her closer. "If you put your mind to it, you three can do whatever you want." Riverkit let out a purr and she noticed that both Moonkit and Echokit seemed to have their spirits lifted as well.

"Since we have this extra training?" Echokit spoke up, looking directly at Jayclaw. "Do you think Goldenstar will make us apprentice's earlier?"

"I'm afraid not." Mistypool mewed. "You still have to be six moons old, it's the warrior code."

"But that's *five* moons away." Echokit sat down, slumping her shoulders and looked at her paws with disappointment written all over her face. Riverkit bounded over to Echokit and brushed up against her sister.

"But that's five moons of extra training we'll get from our father. And you don't have to be a certain age to become a warrior, so if we have more training we'll become warrior's soon!" Riverkit mewed, trying to cheer her sister up. Riverkit wanted to become an apprentice just as much as Echokit, but she also wanted to become an apprentice and outshine all the others. She would be the best apprentice in the Clan.

"That is true." Jayclaw nodded, then looked out into camp. Riverkit followed his gaze and watched as Ivyheart, the AshClan deputy was gathering cats for patrols. "I'm going to try and get myself on a patrol." He nuzzled each of his three daughters and touched muzzles with Mistypool. "I'll be back later with some fresh-kill, behave you three."

"We always do." Moonkit purred, stepping in beside Riverkit and Echokit. "Have fun and catch lots of prey!"

Jayclaw gave one last loving look at his kits before bounding away to Ivyheart and the rest of the Clan. Riverkit watched her father go, mildly upset that they wouldn't be getting anymore training. She drooped her ears slightly, and looked towards her mother.

Mistypool was looking over at Heatherstorm, the new queen who had just recently had her two kits, Lilykit and Graykit.

Neither of them even had their eyes open yet, but Riverkit hoped they would be able to play soon. She enjoyed playing with Echokit and Moonkit but Moonkit was always stargazing and Echokit was clumsy. Maybe Riverkit could train Lilykit and Graykit to be stronger, like a mentor. She relished at the idea with a purr and turned back to her siblings. Once again, Moonkit was staring out into the camp and Echokit appeared to be sulking over something once more.

"What should we do now?" Riverkit asked her sisters, pulling Moonkit's attention back to reality and lifting Echokit's head. "We could play a game, or go explore?" She looked with a hopeful glance over her shoulder at Mistypool.

"I'm afraid not." Mistypool purred. "You're still a bit young for exploring just yet. The Clan is very busy these days and we don't need our warriors tripping over the tails of nosy kits."

Riverkit's ears drooped, she sat down and watched as Moonkit's icy blue gaze went back to the sky and Echokit kept her silence. She wished that her siblings were more like her, full of ambition and loving to play. She sighed and tried to follow what Moonkit was looking at, but she appeared to just be watching the clouds.

Riverkit wondered what was so interesting, but couldn't wrap her mind around it. She didn't want to watch clouds and she didn't want to sulk, she wanted to train more with her father. She wanted to put her paws to work and she wanted to make use of herself, she could only hope Jayclaw would return soon.

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Moonkit was twitching in her sleep, resting her tail over Riverkit's nose. She let out a tiny sneeze and was ripped out of her sleep. She lifted her head and looked around, blinking sleep away. Moonkit was turned onto her back with her silver paws twitching in her dreams, Echokit was curled into a tight ball close to Mistypool.

Riverkit looked out into the camp, it was in the middle of the night and AshClan was silent. She sat up, careful not to disturb her nestmates but enough to where she could see farther out into the camp. Her paws itched for exploration, she wanted to see the camp. It was her home and she should've seen it by now! More than just the outside of it when she trained with her father.

Riverkit looked around, Mistypool was sound asleep and so was Heatherstorm, cuddling closing with her two kits. Riverkit lifted her paw hesitantly over Moonkit's sleeping form and stepped onto the nursery floor. She stepped over her sister and looked back at them, none of them had been woken up by her movements.

Taking a deep breath and gathering her bravery, Riverkit made her way out of the nursery and stepping into the fresh, open air. She breathed in the scent of pine needles, and looked around. There was a tortoiseshell she-cat named Berryleaf sitting near the camp's entrance, her back was turned to Riverkit.

She didn't think that she would be able to explore the camp, not with Berryleaf sitting watch, but maybe she could explore something else. Riverkit walked silently along the edge of the nursery and towards the back end of the camp. AshClan's camp was surrounded by large boulders and were easy to sneak by.

She crept silently through the forest, it was silent except for the sound of her paws shifting the pine needles on the forest floor. She looked up at the night sky, taking in the beautiful sight of silverpelt through the looming pine trees above her. She closed her eyes, enjoying the cool night of the forest.

"You shouldn't be out here." Riverkit jumped, spinning around and panic seizing her heart. She found herself face to face with a large golden she-cat with amusement filled green eyes.

"Goldenstar." Riverkit's mouth dropped, she took a step back, tucking her tail between her legs and lowering her head. She was going to be in so much trouble. "I'm so sorry, I just--" She stammered through her words. "I just wanted to explore a bit."

Goldenstar let out a purr. "Don't worry, Riverkit. You didn't get far

enough to put yourself in any danger." The leader sat down, licking her paw. "But the forest can be dangerous for a kit, you shouldn't leave the nursery."

Riverkit's ears dropped. "But I want to *explore,* I want to see the forest and the camp. I want to see it all."

"I admire your ambition, Riverkit." Goldenstar purred. "There's nothing wrong with wanting to explore, but that time will come soon." She looked up, staring at the moon. "Only six moons of your life is spent as a kit, confined to the nursery." Her green eyes drifted back down Riverkit. "You only have five moons of those left, and when you get older you'll soon realize how quickly those six moons pass you by. In five moons you'll be free to learn and explore the forest, but for now you should enjoy your time as a kit."

Riverkit looked at her paws, Goldenstar had a point. She looked into the forest, her heart aching to see more of it. She took a deep breath, knowing that one day she would see all of it and more, because one day she would be leader.

"Let's get you back into your nest for the night." Goldenstar stood up, nudging Riverkit back to camp with her paw. "I won't tell your parents about your late night venture, as long as you promise to stay in your nest."

"I promise, Goldenstar." Riverkit mewed, looking up at her leader. Goldenstar stood tall, and proud, her golden pelt shimmering in the moonlight and her green eyes glittering with confidence. *That's the kind of cat I want to be.* Riverkit though, watching the AshClan leader as they made their way back to camp. *No, that's the kind of* leader *I want to be!*

Chapter 2

Stars swirled above, forming images of cats. Moonkit watched with awe, her blue eyes sparkling as she watched the display. Her paws ached to reach up and touch the stars, but she remained on the ground. Moonkit was surrounded by towering white trees that glowed from the moonlight, she had no idea where she was but she never wanted to leave. Around her she swore she could hear whispers, but couldn't make out what they were saying. She closed her eyes, straining to hear.

What Moonkit heard however wasn't voices, it was rustling. Her ears twitched and she focused harder on the sound. It was near her, it sounded like a cat walking and shifting moss. Moonkit's eyes opened and she was no longer in the glowing forest, but rather back in AshClan camp in the nursery. She lifted her head and looked at her littermates, Echokit was sleeping soundly; curled up in a tight ball. Riverkit, however, looked as if she had just settled down. Her heartbeat was faster than it should've been for a sleeping cat and her pelt smelled of the forest.

Have you been outside, Riverkit? Moonkit silently questioned her sister, she knew that Riverkit had antsy paws but would she really leave the nursery in the middle of the night? Moonkit rested her head on her paws, looking back towards the entrance of the nursery. The glowing forest and moving stars still fresh in her mind, she wanted to go back. The only way she knew how to get there was in her dreams, she wished to she more of the forest. To see more of the cat shaped stars and finally hear the whispers that beckoned her.

Neither Echokit nor Riverkit understood her interest in the stars, she would speak of her glowing forest to them but they didn't seem to take her seriously. *Why would I imagine such a place?* She wanted to argue. *It has to be real, and I want to find it!* Moonkit hadn't told her parents of her dreams, she didn't want to be told she was just having kit-dreams and brushed off. Jayclaw was so determined to

get his daughters to be the best warriors they could be, but Moonkit couldn't help but wonder if there was something more than just hunting and fighting.

In the midst of her thoughts, Moonkit drifted back to sleep where she dreamed more of the glowing forest. She longed to see more, and wondered just how she would do that when she was just a little kit.

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Moonkit woke up the next day with the sun shining on her face. She always woke up a little discouraged, torn from her forest and back into a world where no cat believed in her dreams. *Why do we even have dreams if they don't mean anything?* Moonkit questioned herself. *Dreams must have a purpose.* Moonkit sat up, slicking down her sleep-ruffled pelt and turned to look at her sisters. Echokit was starting to wake up but Riverkit was still sleeping heavily. Moonkit figured she was right and that Riverkit had snuck out last night and hadn't gotten as much sleep.

"Good morning my daughters." A deep voice sounded into the nursery where Jayclaw poked his head in with a large squirrel in his jaws. "Hope you're hungry." He set down the squirrel before Moonkit and Echokit while Mistypool roused awake behind them. Jayclaw's eyes went to Riverkit, he leaned over and gave her a gentle poke, the blue-gray she-cat jumped up in alarm. "Don't sleep the day away, Riverkit." Jayclaw mewed as Riverkit forced herself awake. "Too much to do in a day."

Riverkit let out a yawn. "But I didn't sleep well last night." She complained, but her blue eyes focused on the squirrel.

"Then go to sleep earlier tonight." Jayclaw nudged the squirrel towards his mate and daughters. "Eat up." The three she-cats scrambled out of the nest to each take a bite of the squirrel.

When Moonkit was younger she never thought she would enjoy something more than her mother's milk but squirrel was probably her favorite thing in the whole forest to eat. After Moonkit and her sisters ate, Mistypool finished off the prey. "Thank you." She purred,

leaning in to touch her nose to Jayclaw's.

"Thank you." Echokit added with a purr.

"Yeah, thanks!" Riverkit jumped, clearly already energized for the day.

"You're very welcome." Jayclaw looked both proud and satisfied. "I have a border patrol to go on, but when I get back it's more training." Echokit and Riverkit both looked excited, but Moonkit couldn't find the same excitement. She liked training and spending time with her family, but she always got distracted by other things. She wanted to see if the clouds would move like the stars in her dreams, but they never did.

Jayclaw turned back into the camp while Riverkit began batting around a ball of moss. Moonkit heard Echokit and Riverkit playing behind her but she had no interest. Moonkit looked out at the sky, narrowing her eyes. The sky was clear, no clouds blocking the vast blue. She felt a breeze sweep in, but something else caught her eyes.

She felt something hit her back and Moonkit looked over her shoulder to see that Riverkit had batted the moss ball towards her. "Play with us, Moonkit." She dropped into a playful crouch.

"Uh," Moonkit looked back to where she had seen movement. "Give me a second." Moonkit stood up and walked towards the front of the nursery, she heard a scoff from Riverkit but ignored it. Near the entrance of the nursery was a feather, soft and gray.

"What are you looking at?" Echokit stepped in beside Moonkit, her voice confused.

"A feather." Moonkit replied quietly, for some reason something felt off about this feather. She just couldn't figure out why.

"A feather?" Riverkit groaned behind her. "What's so special about a *feather*? There's birds all over the forest."

Moonkit ignored Riverkit's tone and looked outside, suddenly clouds were rolling in. Dark clouds. "It's going to rain." She mewed. "Look at the clouds."

"Yeah, it's newleaf." Riverkit sounded irritated. "It rains in newleaf. Who cares?"

"If it's going to rain," Mistypool stood up. "Then you three should stay away from the entrance, don't want you catching a cold."

Moonkit looked over her shoulder as Mistypool was going towards her, she brushed the feather away with her tail. "Birds can carry sickness, Moonkit." She mewed, her voice soft. "You shouldn't play with strange feathers."

"But we eat birds." Moonkit argued, trying to see where the feather went but it was already long gone.

"None of the birds we eat have large gray feathers like that," Mistypool mewed, nudging Moonkit away from the nursery entrance. "It's best to just leave it be."

Moonkit opened her mouth to argue but was cut off by a large crack of thunder. She jumped forward, skidding on stray moss. Moonkit stood trembling, the thunder nearly scaring her fur off. Her heart raced and she noticed Echokit and Riverkit had also been given quite the jump.

"It's alright kits." Mistypool swept her kits in close. "It's just a storm, it should pass quickly." Moonkit climbed into the nest, looking out in the camp. It was now darker and rain was starting to fall. She could hear it pelt the top of the den and thunder rolling in the distance. With a sigh, Moonkit forced herself to relax. *Why do I have to be so weird?* Moonkit asked herself. *Of course it was just a feather, what else would it be?*

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Moonkit hadn't realized she had fallen asleep, but she was back in the glowing forest, but the stars weren't moving this time. Moonkit looked around, she could scent cats but heard no whispers. *Why is it different this time?* A few fox-lengths behind her, Moonkit heard pawsteps. She spun around to see the glowing figure of a cat. She was large and gray, moving with grace as stars sparkled in her fur. Moonkit realized with shock that this was a StarClan cat, but which

cat was it?

"Excuse me!" Moonkit called, trying to get the she-cats attention, but the StarClan did not turn her head. "Where am I? Can you tell me what this place is?" Once again, Moonkit's only response was silence. Moonkit took action and bounded after the she-cat, she needed answers!

Moonkit ran as fast as her little paws would carry her, but by the time she reached the StarClan cat she was gone. The only thing that remained was a faint scent of AshClan. Moonkit let out a frustrated sigh, her heart pounding in her chest. Moonkit looked down at her paws and was shocked to find a gray feather at her paws, the same feather she had seen earlier. Moonkit stared at the feather in confusion, what did this mean? *Why is this feather so important?* Moonkit's ears twitched with annoyance.

"Whoever you are." Moonkit called out into the forest. "Please tell me what's going on." She looked around, looking for any sign of the gray she-cat. "I'm just a kit, I don't know what you want me to do with this feather."

Would you be quiet! Moonkit's heart leaped when she heard a response, but the forest faded into black and Moonkit opened her eyes to the nursery and Riverkit glaring at her. "You're kicking and talking in your sleep again."

Again? Moonkit lowered her head, licking her chest in embarrassment. "I'm sorry, Riverkit." Her pelt burned with embarrassment. She lifted her head, Echokit was still sleeping and Riverkit was attempting to do the same. However, Mistypool was nowhere in sight. Riverkit looked over at Heatherstorm and her cats, the queen was awake while watching her two kits sleep.

"Heatherstorm?" Moonkit asked quietly, getting the she-cat's attention. Heatherstorm looked over with interest.

"Yes, Moonkit?" She questioned.

"Where's Mistypool?" She looked around for her mother, somewhat concerned.

"Jayclaw came and got her a moment ago, she's probably out in camp." Heatherstorm explained.

"Thank you." Moonkit dipped her head and padded over the nursery entrance. It was still raining, but not as hard. She looked out into the rain and saw the Clan gathering in the center of camp. Moonkit tilted her head, wondering what they were doing. Was there a ceremony? Moonkit spotted Mistypool sitting close by Jayclaw, Mistypool looked sad. Goldenstar was sitting before the Clan, and she too looked sad. *What happened?*

Mistypool looked over at her shoulder at the nursery, when she spotted Moonkit she said something to Jayclaw and padded over to her. "What's going on?" Moonkit questioned, looking past Mistypool to see what was happening.

"Featherstorm died this morning." Mistypool explained sadly.

"What?" Moonkit took a step back. "How did she die? What happened?" Moonkit remembered Featherstorm being AshClan's medicine cat.

"She was old," Mistypool explained, brushing her tail against Moonkit's pelt. "Her age finally caught up to her." Moonkit stared past Mistypool, noticing that there was a cat in the middle of the group, lying down. Her gray fur soaked down by the rain. "Don't think about it too much." Moonkit's attention was pulled back by Mistypool. "Go in there and keep warm from the rain, I'll be back in soon. If you need anything ask Heatherstorm."

Moonkit didn't argue, but she wanted to. Her mind was racing with questions, but she walked back to her nest and sat down. Riverkit had fallen back asleep, but Moonkit didn't know if she could. Moonkit's mind wandered back to her most recent dream, with the gray she-cat who left behind a feather.

Realisation shot through Moonkit. Was the StarClan cat she saw, Featherstorm? Did she see the medicine cat as she made her way through the glowing forest? Was the glowing forest StarClan's territory? Her ears twitched with excitement. She had to go back, she had learn more. Moonkit would give anything to learn more

about StarClan, but the only way she knew how was to sleep. Moonkit closed her eyes, staying put until her dreams took her back to StarClan's forest, ready to learn.

Chapter 3

Echokit let out a yawn, stretching out her forelegs. Beside her, Lilykit and Graykit were wrestling playfully. They finally reached a playful age, but were still too small for Echokit and her sisters. Moonkit wasn't much bigger than them, but Riverkit was and Riverkit was the most playful. Echokit enjoyed playing, but it wasn't what she wanted to do at all times. Moonkit was the complete opposite, she was always staring into space and distracted by things like feathers.

Ever since the death of Featherstorm a moon ago, Moonkit had been acting a lot different. She jumped at every drifting leaf or awkward looking stone. Echokit had no idea what was going on with her, but she was afraid to ask. Riverkit brushed it off as Moonkit being weird, but Echokit couldn't help but think it was something else.

She looked at Moonkit, the tabby she-cat was twitching in her sleep as she normally did and Riverkit was snoring softly. Echokit turned to Mistypool who was also still asleep, she sighed quietly and looked at her white paws. It wouldn't be long before her sisters woke up and Jayclaw showed up to do more training with them.

Echokit loved training with her father and sisters, but she wasn't nearly as good as Riverkit. It was embarrassing to be constantly tripping over her own paws and failing to catch leaves and pebbles while Riverkit did it without effort. Echokit looked out into the camp, she could see Rainpaw walking with her sister, Hollypaw and both their mentors, Tawnyfrost and Robinflight.

Echokit longed to become an apprentice, where she could roam the forest freely and provide for her Clan. Riverkit spoke of being leader someday, but Echokit didn't want to be leader. She just wanted to be the best warrior she could be, no matter what.

Behind her, Riverkit let out a groan and sat up with a hefty yawn. Echokit looked at her sister as she struggled to wake up, her blue

eyes foggy. Echokit turned away, allowing Riverkit to wake up properly. She could tell when Riverkit was fully awake because she felt her sister's paws on her shoulders.

"Let's play, Echokit!" She exclaimed, nearly shoving Echokit out of the nest. "Before Jayclaw comes to give us training we can get some playtime done and show Lilykit and Graykit how it's done."

"Alright." Echokit agreed and gently shoved Riverkit off, careful that she didn't wake Moonkit and Mistypool. Echokit and Riverkit climbed out of their nest and faced each other. "What are we going to play?"

Riverkit looked around, narrowing her blue eyes. "Well," She mewed, looking at the floor. "We don't want to wake up Moonkit or Mistypool, and we don't want to risk hurting Lilykit and Graykit." The blue-gray she-cat was deep in thought, trying to figure out a game for the two of them to play. "I got it!" She exclaimed, but before Echokit could ask what the game was she was being pinned to the ground.

Echokit squirmed under her sister's larger weight, this wasn't exactly what she had in mind. *Everything has to be so rough with her.* Echokit thought with contempt, but fought back against Riverkit. She pushed her paws into Riverkit's belly, causing the kit to let out a squawk and stumble backwards. Echokit jumped to her paws while Riverkit steadied herself, but Riverkit was instantly going after Echokit again. Echokit attempted to get out of Riverkit's way but slipped on a small pile of moss. Her white paws came out from under her and she kicked up the moss while she fell to the ground.

Riverkit used to chance to pin Echokit against the stone floor of the den. "You're so clumsy." She teased. Echokit's pelt burned with embarrassment and she used her hind legs to kick Riverkit in the stomach. Riverkit let out a gasp of air and fell backwards, she sat down heavily and let out a wheeze. "Not so hard!" Riverkit spat. "We're only playing, not fighting SunClan." She grumbled.

Annoyance sparked inside Echokit. "You always tell me I'm not trying hard enough so I tried harder!" She shouted, lashing her small tail. "Maybe you should be able to handle stronger kicks."

Riverkit growled and jumped on Echokit again, this time Echokit could feel that her sister was attacking with much heavier blows. She felt sharp paws poking into her sides and belly. Echokit struggled under Riverkit and kept kicking and hissing, but Riverkit did not let up. Echokit knew to never fight Clanmates with claws, but she wanted Riverkit off of her! Her jabs were starting to hurt.

"Stop!" Echokit and Riverkit's battle froze as they heard the cry of Moonkit. Echokit looked out from underneath Riverkit's blue fur at Moonkit who watched her sisters with an inkling of horror in her icy eyes. "Why are you two fighting so rough?" She questioned.

Riverkit got off of Echokit and smoothed down her fur. "Echokit decided that it was better if fight harder since she kicked me in the belly."

Echokit sat up as well, her gray tabby fur sticking out in all directions and her body aching. "I didn't mean that hard!" She spat, turning her back to Riverkit. "I didn't mean to kick you so hard but you were being mean!"

"Oh boo hoo," Riverkit taunted. "Did I hurt your feelings? Maybe you should go share a nest with Lilykit and Graykit if you're gonna act like that, warriors don't get hurt feelings."

Rage bubbled up inside Echokit, she whirled on Riverkit and let out a hiss. "I'm more of a warrior than you'll ever be, Riverkit! I respect my Clanmates, unlike you."

Riverkit lashed out, her forepaw hitting Echokit in the muzzle painfully. She stumbled backwards with a hiss and rubbed her aching nose.

"Riverkit! Echokit! Enough!" Echokit froze as she heard her father's deep, commanding voice filled with anger. She turned her head slowly to see Jayclaw standing in the nursery entrance. "I don't know what's going on between you two but I won't stand for you two attacking each other like that! You're sisters for StarClan's sake!" Echokit ducked her head, avoiding both her father's and Riverkit's gaze.

"Echokit kicked me in the stomach." Riverkit tattled, her voice brisk with anger. "And then told me I wasn't as good a warrior as her."

"You hit me in the nose! You've been teasing me this whole time!" Echokit retaliated, suddenly finding the courage to meet Riverkit's anger filled gaze.

"I said *enough!*" Jayclaw shouted once more, Riverkit and Echokit flattened themselves to the ground. "Apologize to each other right now." He growled, Echokit lifted her head but noticed that Riverkit wasn't looking at her, instead she was sending her fiery gaze to the ground.

"Listen to your father kits." Echokit turned to see that Mistypool was now awake, anger sparking in her blue eyes.

Echokit took a deep breath and faced her sister who still refused to meet her gaze. "I'm sorry, Riverkit." She mewed, making her voice heard to both her parents. Riverkit's ears twitched but she didn't respond.

"Riverkit." Jayclaw growled, Riverkit ducked her head lower.

"I'm sorry." She grumbled, still refusing to look up. Jayclaw let out a sigh and looked towards Mistypool and Moonkit.

"I'm going to talk with these two for a moment." He mewed, Echokit looked up fearing punishment. Riverkit still hadn't looked up but had visibly tensed even more. Mistypool nodded and Jayclaw beckoned his two daughters forward.

"Let's talk." Jayclaw nudged Riverkit to her paws, but she kept her blue eyes focused on her paws. Echokit didn't wait for her father to tell her again and stood up, following him out of the nursery. Before they made it out she shot a glance over her shoulder at Moonkit who looked concerned.

Jayclaw led Riverkit and Echokit around the nursery and told them to sit down. Echokit sat down, looking over at Riverkit who hadn't stopped sulking from their scolding. Echokit looked back at their father who was also sitting down. "I understand you two are kits,

and kits will argue but I can't have the two of you fighting. Not only is it disruptive but it can be destructive." Echokit flattened her ears. "As you become apprentices and eventually warriors you will soon realize the importance of being close with your siblings." Out of the corner of her eye Echokit noticed that Riverkit had finally lifted her head. "I was incredibly close with my brother, Skywing. We were best friends." Sadness shadowed his green eyes.

"What happened to him?" Echokit questioned.

"He passed away last leaf-bare when he caught greencough." Jayclaw explained with a grief-filled sigh. "It was just before the three of you were born." He shook his head for a moment. "My point is, I want all three of you two respect and love each other. If anything were to happen to you three and you weren't close, you would regret it. I love all of you and I want all of you to love each other, understand?

"Yes." Echokit nodded, wondering what her uncle was like, and not wanting to know what it would be like to lose either Riverkit and Moonkit. She looked at Riverkit who no longer looked annoyed, just sad.

"Yes." The blue-gray she-cat mewed. "I understand." She looked over at Echokit and met her green gaze. She didn't say it, but Echokit could see that Riverkit was apologizing. Echokit gave a nod and the two kits stood up.

"Let's get back to the nursery then, Moonkit didn't hear this but she's not as...aggressive as the two of you."

"I don't think Moonkit would hurt a butterfly." Riverkit let out a tiny giggle and Echokit couldn't help but both laugh and agree. Moonkit was so gentle, Echokit wondered what kind of warrior she would be. A peaceful one for sure. They made it back into the nursery where Mistypool welcomed them back and Jayclaw bid them farewell to take his apprentice out training.

"What did he talk about?" Moonkit questioned when Riverkit and Echokit returned. "Did he yell at you."
"Not really." Riverkit mewed, sitting in the moss. "He just told us to

respect each other and such. That siblings are important."

Echokit couldn't help but notice that Riverkit completely let out the part about Skywing, but maybe Riverkit had noticed that Featherstorm's death had changed Moonkit as well and didn't want to give her more death to think about. Echokit nodded and looked out the nursery towards the sky. She was eager to become an apprentice, but also slightly scared. Whatever happened, she hoped that she and her sisters would remain close forever.

Chapter 4

The sun was bright, covering the forest with early greenleaf warmth. Moonkit was resting in a patch of sun, watching Riverkit and Echokit play. Ever since Jayclaw spoke to them they had become much better friends, which Moonkit was grateful for. She wasn't sure what her father told her sisters but it seemed to calm the two of them down, which Moonkit was grateful.

However, not much had changed with how much and how rough they liked to play. Moonkit did notice that Echokit and Riverkit were playing as much with each other as they were with Graykit and Lilykit. Moonkit had no interest in playing, she couldn't get her mind off of her dreams. Her paws longed to travel the forest and find the glowing woods with beautiful white trees.

"Watch your paws, Echokit!" A sharp hiss came from Riverkit, Moonkit looked over at her playing sisters. Riverkit's fur was on edge and she had a sharp glint in her blue eyes. "You crushed my tail."

Moonkit could tell that Echokit wanted to retaliate and start a fight, but much to Moonkit's surprise she held her tongue. Instead, Echokit let out a sigh and apologized through grit teeth. Riverkit let out a snort and their playing continued, Lilykit and Graykit were growing quickly and were comparable to Moonkit and her siblings.

Moonkit's ears twitched as she heard pawsteps behind her. "Why aren't you playing with them?" A voice spoke above Moonkit's head, she looked upwards to see Mistypool.

Moonkit shrugged. "I just don't feel like playing right now." She mewed, looking back into the camp. The warm season had kept AshClan active and busy, she could see the apprentices Lionpaw and Hazelpaw sharing fresh-kill together while a group of senior warriors had a close conversation over their own pieces of prey. Ivyheart had just sent the sunhigh patrol out into the forest, and the hunting patrol would probably return soon, which Jayclaw was on.

Moonkit loved her father, but she dreaded his visits because it usually meant more training. Moonkit didn't want to constantly fight and hunt, she wanted to something else; she just didn't know what.

"Well," Mistypool sat down beside Moonkit. "Do you want to do me a favor?" She questioned, looking out into the camp as well.

"Sure." Moonkit sat up. "What is it?"

"Heatherstorm was complaining of a belly ache, would you want to run across to the medicine cat den and get some herbs from Eagleclaw?" Mistypool requested. Moonkit's eyes widened.

"Really? But you barely let us out into the camp." Moonkit questioned, wondering what suddenly changed in her mother.

Mistypool let out a low chuckle and lowered her head. "That's mostly because Riverkit and Echokit can't keep their noses out of trouble." She purred. "But I know you'll be responsible."

Moonkit felt warmed and delighted by her mother's words, she jumped to her paws and held her head high. "I won't let you down!" With another purr from Mistypool, Moonkit ran out into the camp. She was going to run to the medicine cat den, but remember that she needed to be responsible. *I don't need any cats telling Mistypool and Jayclaw that I ran across camp like a crazy cat.*

The medicine cat den wasn't far from the nursery, but Moonkit walked proudly with her head held high. She noticed a few cats looking at her but she kept walking. She neared the medicine cat den and poked her head inside. It was dim and smelled strongly of pungently of herbs.

In the back of the den she saw the large tabby form of Eagleclaw. Suddenly, Moonkit tensed. She had heard stories of how mean Eagleclaw was, only rivaled by his brother, Sharptongue in attitude. Moonkit swallowed her fear and dared to step inside the den. "H-hello?" She called into the den.

Eagleclaw's ears twitched and he turned around, resting his sharp

amber eyes on Moonkit. "Moonkit?" He mewed, stepping closer to her. "Is everything okay?"

Moonkit nodded. "Y-yes. Heatherstorm has a belly ache, Mistypool sent me to you to get something."

"I see." Eagleclaw mewed. "Well, come on in. I'll get the herbs that Heatherstorm needs." The tabby tom returned to the back of his den and began sifting through herbs. Moonkit stepped inside and looked around. It was neat, with a stack of moss balls along the side wall and a single nest.

"So you sleep alone in this den?" Moonkit questioned out of curiosity.

"Since Featherstorm died, yes." Eagleclaw responded without turning around. "Unless there's sick or injured cats that I need to look over, I'm in here by myself."

"That sounds kind of lonely." Moonkit pointed out. "Though, It would be nice to not have to share a den with Echokit and Riverkit for a night."

"Are they noisy sleepers?"

Moonkit lowered her head. "Not really..." She shuffled her paws. "I'm the noisy sleeper, Riverkit always wakes me up to tell me to be quiet."

"Do you have problems sleeping at the night?" Eagleclaw asked with a touch of concern in his mew.

Moonkit's pelt grew warm, she didn't feel like having another cat tell her that her dreams were pointless. "No, I just dream a lot."

"What do you dream about?" Eagleclaw seemed to be interested now. "Anything interesting."

"Only to me." Moonkit stared at her silver paws. "Everyone else tells me they're pointless."

"Tell me about them." Eagleclaw sat down, resting his tail across his

paws. His amber eyes were curious.

Moonkit felt awkward now. "You'll just think they're stupid kit dreams too."

Eagleclaw narrowed his eyes. "Try me."

Moonkit blinked, would Eagleclaw really believe her? She didn't know, but at least she could finally talk about her dreams with someone. "Well..." Moonkit began. "I always see this forest, it has super tall white trees that glow in the moonlight. Everytime I'm in that forest I hear voices, but I can't exactly make out what they're seeing. Once I saw a silver tabby she-cat, but she didn't say anything to me. It feels so real everytime I'm there, and I want to explore but I can never move my paws before I wake up. It feels almost feels like something is calling me, I want to see it but--" Moonkit cut herself off, she realized that she was rambling.

"But what?" Eagleclaw pressed.

Moonkit shook her head. "Don't worry about it, it's just a dream. I doubt a place like that is even real."

"But it is real." Moonkit looked at Eagleclaw in shock.

"*What?*" Moonkit's jaw dropped. "That place is *real?* Where is it?"

"It sounds a lot like the Spirit Woods, it's where the Moonstone lies. Where medicine cats and leaders communicate with StarClan." Moonkit couldn't believe what she was hearing, this place was real and connected to the StarClan. *Then why am I dreaming about it?*

"You should head back now." Eagleclaw broke her thoughts, nudging a leaf bundle towards her. "Here's some juniper, should help with Heatherstorm's belly ache." Moonkit just stared at the herbs, forgetting that they had been the reason she had even came here. *But I have so many questions! I don't want to leave.*

"Don't worry, Moonkit." Eagleclaw nudged Moonkit to her paws. "When you figure out what these dreams mean, come see me."

"What do they mean?" Moonkit questioned. "I don't know."

"That's for you to figure out." Eagleclaw's expression had almost turned smug, which frustrated Moonkit. "I would go before your mother starts to worry."

Moonkit didn't want to leave, but she knew that Eagleclaw was right. Mistypool had sent her because she thought that Moonkit was responsible, she couldn't prove her mother wrong. Ignoring her curiosity, Moonkit picked up the bundle of berries and padded back to the nursery. She stepped back into the nursery and it appeared that Echokit and Riverkit hadn't even noticed her absence.

Moonkit looked over at Heatherstorm and Mistypool who were having a conversation. Moonkit set the herbs down in front of them after crossing the nursery. "Here you go." She nudged them forward with her paws.

"Thank you, Moonkit." Heatherstorm purred and quickly ate the juniper berries. "Now if I could just get Graykit and Lilykit to calm down."

"Just wait until they're four moons old." Mistypool chuckled. "It's impossible to get them to settle down for even a second."

"Don't remind me." Heatherstorm laughed and focused on her kits.

"Eagleclaw wasn't too scary was he?" Mistypool questioned, turning her attention back to Moonkit.

"No," Moonkit mewed, sitting down beside her mother. "He was actually nice, he doesn't seem as mean as others say he is."

"He's always had a very sharp attitude." Mistypool said. "And he has very minimal patience with kits, so I'm glad that he was nice to you."

"Well the kits I know are incredibly obnoxious." Moonkit mewed, watching her sisters wrestle.

"That could be part of it." Mistypool purred. "Either way, I'm glad that I have a calm kit like you. You'll be there to keep your sisters in line."

Is that really my job? Moonkit thought. *Why can't Riverkit and Echokit keep themselves in line?*

Moonkit stared at a small piece of moss that rolled across the nursery floor. It was another day, and yet Echokit and Riverkit continued to fight and play, the same as yesterday. Moonkit didn't want to do the same thing every single day, she wanted to go learn more. She wanted to see the medicine cat den again, she wanted to talk to Eagleclaw again.

She had thought about his words, urging her to find the meaning to her dreams but she just couldn't figure it out. She had no idea why she would be dreaming of a place where leader's went. *I don't want to be leader, Riverkit does.* She thought with a snort.

Movement caught her eye and she noticed Jayclaw approaching the nursery. *Oh great.* Moonkit thought begrudgingly. *More training.*

"Good afternoon, kits." Jayclaw mewed, stepping into the nursery and giving Mistypool a loving look.

"Hi!" Riverkit instantly stopped their play fighting and ran over to their father, jumping at his paws. "Is it time for more training?"

"It is." Jayclaw sat down. "You have less than two moons before you become apprentices, then it is up to your mentors to teach you everything else you need to become a warrior."

"Won't you still train us?" Riverkit begged. "I love training with *you.* What if my mentor isn't good enough?"

"I can assure that every cat in AshClan will be capable of training you, Riverkit. And I have my own apprentice to train, I'm working on getting Lionpaw into the warriors den. If you learn quickly then you can train with us alongside your mentors."

"Who will our mentors be?" Echokit questioned, looking both curious and nervous. "Will you pick them for us?"

Jayclaw shook his head. "Goldenstar will pick the right mentors for you, it's her job not mine." He stopped answering questions and looked down at his kits. "Enough talk, let's train." Jayclaw pushed

forward their training pebbles that they kept at the nursery's entrance. "Show me your pounces."

Riverkit instantly began, attacking her pebble without hesitation and Echokit was close behind her, but Moonkit was interested in something else. She saw Eagleclaw outside of his den telling something to Ivyheart. *What is he talking about?* She wondered. *What do medicine cat's do when they're not healing their Clanmates?*

"Moonkit!" Jayclaw's snapping voice ripped her attention back to her pebble. "Stop staring off into space."

"She's probably looking for more feathers." Riverkit teased. Moonkit puffed out her fur, feeling flustered.

"What is this about feathers?" Jayclaw questioned, looking confused.

"Moonkit got so upset about a feather, it was just another one of her daydreams." Riverkit explained, the way she acted like she knew everything just riled Moonkit even more.

"It *wasn't* a daydream!" Moonkit argued with her sister, but Riverkit just rolled her eyes.

"You should really learn how to focus on the world in front of you, that's what good warriors do. You won't make it very far with fighting or hunting." *There's more to life than fighting and hunting!* Moonkit lashed her tail.

"Riverkit is right, Moonkit." Jayclaw put in, just fueling Riverkit's ego more. "You need to focus, you can't let your mind wander. You need to focus on the task in front of you, you could get hurt or lose prey that way."

They don't understand! Moonkit was getting more and more frustrated. "Stop talking to me like I'm an idiot!" She cried out, whirling on Riverkit. "You have no idea what you're talking about, you're just being mean!"

Riverkit flattened her ears and puffed out her blue-gray fur, Jayclaw stepped forward. "Moonkit, relax, we're not trying to--"

"No!" Moonkit wailed, she knew she was making a scene and she didn't care. "You all look at me like I'm crazy, but maybe there's something more to my dreams! Maybe there's more to being a warrior than just fighting and hunting everyday. I don't want to spend the rest of my life chasing prey, I want to do something!"

Realization snapped inside Moonkit, it wasn't just *leaders* who went to the Moonstone, it was medicine cats too. She stopped her yelling and took a deep breath. "I don't want to be a warrior?"

"Then what do you want?" Mistypool stepped in, her mother's soft voice calming her anger.

Moonkit looked at her mother, who had shining, encouraging blue eyes. "I want to be a medicine cat."

Mistypool let out a purr. "See, that wasn't so hard." She rested her tail on Moonkit's shoulders. Then she turned her attention to Jayclaw. "See what happens when you *ask* them?" Her voice was scolding.

Jayclaw looked away in embarrassment. "Sorry," He cleared his throat and looked down at Moonkit. "I'm sorry, Moonkit. I should've focused on more on what you wanted, I just figured that you all wanted to be warriors."

"Are you mad at me? Because I won't be a big brave warrior like you?" Moonkit thought, fearing disappointment from her father. *He has such high hopes for us.*

"Of course not." Jayclaw wrapped his tail around Moonkit. "I could never be mad at you, especially for following your heart. You won't be an incredible warrior, you'll be an incredible medicine cat and that is just as good in my eyes."

Moonkit felt warmed and loved, she brushed against her father. "Thank you." She purred, then looked at her sisters.

"A medicine cat, huh?" Riverkit marched up to Moonkit. "I guess it all makes sense now."

Echokit padded up to her as well. "We won't get to train together,

but you can patch us up after a battle!"

Moonkit let out a loud purr, she finally felt like she was on the right path. *This is what I'm meant to do.* She thought happily. *I need to tell Eagleclaw.*

Chapter 5

Today is the day. Riverkit took a deep breath, barely able to contain her excitement. *Today is the day that I start my path to becoming a warrior!* Her claws scraped the bottom of the nursery, and she looked over at Mistypool who was washing Moonkit's silver tabby fur.

"Can we go yet?" Riverkit asked with a loud groan. "We're clean enough!"

"It's your apprentice ceremony." Mistypool twitched her tail. "I will not have my kits looking like they just fought a fox kit!" Riverkit rolled her eyes, they weren't kits anymore! They needed to be treated as such! "And now," Mistypool mewed, letting Moonkit go. "It's your turn."

Riverkit felt a paw wrap around her and pull her in. Riverkit squirmed, trying to get out of her mother's grasp. "I look fine! Let me go!" Against her wishes, Mistypool washed Riverkit's blue-gray fur. She fought the entire time. *I'm about to be a apprentice!* Finally, Mistypool released Riverkit and she stumbled towards the entrance. Feeling frustrated, Riverkit began to sulk while Mistypool washed Echokit.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!" Goldenstar's call suddenly rang throughout the camp, Riverkit jumped to her paws. "It's time!" She began shoving Moonkit out of the entrance. "Let's go!"

"Don't push!" Moonkit jumped away from Riverkit.

Mistypool let Echokit go and stood up. "Honestly, Riverkit." She mewed, her voice low. "If you want to be treated like an apprentice you should act like it. Apprentices don't rush, they take their time and look modest doing so."

Riverkit groaned. "Fine." She forced herself to walk beside her

sisters out into the camp, the Clan was starting to gathering and formed a large crowd in the center of camp. AshClan was full of warriors, they had to be strongest Clan in the entire forest!

As they walked towards the crowd, Jayclaw fell in beside them. "Remember, sit tall and look proud." He mewed, his eyes brimming with pride. "And Riverkit, you better respect your mentor. Do what they say."

Riverkit rolled her eyes. "I will, I will!" She assured her father. Finally, they reached the center of camp and made their way through the crowd. Riverkit looked up at Goldenstar, the sunlight made her golden pelt shimmer, she sat with such prowess and elegance. *She's so incredible.*

Riverkit, Echokit and Moonkit all sat down in front of the leader's den where Goldenstar sat. "At long last," The leader began. "Three of our kits are ready to leave the nursery and start upon their paths to earning their place in AshClan. I am proud to make these three apprentices today, as we celebrate AshClan growing even stronger!" Cheers rang out, Riverkit could barely sit still from the excitement buzzing through her entire body.

"Riverkit," Riverkit sat tall, puffing out her chest and trying to look as good as Goldenstar did. "From this day forward until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Riverpaw. I've chosen Silverstripe to be your mentor. As my own apprentice, I know that Silverstripe will teach you everything you need to become a warrior that AshClan will be proud of."

I'm being trained by the cat that was trained by Goldenstar! Riverpaw had to contain her excitement as she stood up to face her mentor for the first time. Riverpaw met his bright yellow eyes, filled with excitement. Riverpaw and Silverstripe touched noses, starting their bond as mentor and apprentice. Together, they stepped off to the side so the ceremony could continue.

Once Riverpaw and Silverstripe sat down, Goldenstar continued the ceremony. "Echokit, from this day forward until you have earned your warrior name you will be known as Echopaw. Ripplestep will be your mentor, he is a strong and confident warrior and I know

that he will pass those virtues onto you." Riverpaw watched her sister approach her own mentor and repeat the same routine that Riverpaw and Silverstripe. Deep down Riverpaw hoped that Ripplestep would be able to teach Echopaw in a way that their father couldn't, she didn't have her heart set on doing the best, something that held her back.

Riverpaw knew she would have to train with her sister, but she hoped that she would be able to start training with the older apprentices, the ones she could actually compete with. Echopaw and Ripplestep moved to the side and the only kit that remaind was Moonkit. Riverpaw honestly wished she could train with Moonkit over Echopaw, but Moonkit wouldn't be able to handle being a warrior, not with how ditzy she got.

"Moonkit has chosen a different path than her sisters," Goldenstar began. "Instead of hunting and fighting, she will be serving her Clan with herbs and healing. Moonkit, from this day forward until you have earned your true medicine cat name, you will be known as Moonpaw." From the crowd stepped Eagleclaw, he stood tall with fierce amber eyes. *I don't know how Moonpaw will be able to handle a mean cat like him.* "Eagleclaw hasn't been on his own without Featherstorm for a long time, but I have no doubt that he will be able to train Moonpaw into a wonderful medicine cat."

Moonpaw touched noses with Eagelclaw and then joined her sisters on the side. Moonkit's eyes shimmer with joy and excitement, Riverpaw didn't see the appeal in dealing with bitter herbs and wounds, but if it made Moonkit happy who was she to complain.

"Riverpaw! Echopaw! Moonpaw!" The Clan cheered for their newest apprentices and Riverpaw held her head high, taking all their praise and admiration. *My next ceremony will be when I become a warrior!* Riverpaw wanted that ceremony to come as soon as possible, she jumped to her paws and faced her mentor.

"What are we doing first?" She questioned eagerly, imagined hunting or fighting or even exploring the territory. She hadn't been out of camp since her short journey into the forest as a kit that was interrupted by Goldenstar.

Silverstripe shared a look with Ripplestep, they both had amusement burning in their eyes which made Riverpaw incredibly nervous. "We're going to start you two off with some old fashioned moss gathering."

"*What?*" Riverpaw felt frustration rush through her. "You can't be serious, Moonpaw is the medicine cat isn't that *her* job?"

"Moonpaw has a lot of responsibilities." Silverstripe mewed. "She collects moss for the medicine cat den, you collect moss for the nursery and the elders."

"Plus," Ripplestep interjected. "Both of you could stand to learn a little discipline. Being a warrior isn't always fighting and hunting, the Clans are in a time of peace right now so fighting isn't a common thing."

"You're the youngest apprentices." Silverstripe continued. "Out of many, so a lot of the boring duties will fall on your shoulders. When Graykit and Lilykit become warriors then you can share some of those tasks."

"This isn't fair!" Riverpaw complained. "Just because Lionpaw and Hazelpaw are older than us doesn't mean that they shouldn't have to collect moss."

"They do collect moss." Ripplestep pointed out. "Just not as often, they are constantly preparing for their assessments."

Riverpaw snorted. "No more complaining." Silverstripe mewed sternly. "This is the task you've been assigned and you will deal with it. I don't want to hear any more from you, Riverpaw."

Riverpaw held her tongue, she really wasn't liking Silverstripe already. *I should be hunting and fighting! Not playing with plants!* Despite her annoyance, Riverpaw followed her sister and their mentors out into the forest. At least she would get to see part of the forest. "Where are we going?" Echopaw questioned.

"Down by the river." Ripplestep answered. "There's a lot of rocks with moss on them down there, we should be able to get a good

amount."

Riverpaw stayed silent, just trodding behind the others with her head lowered. All she had to do was get through today, then she could start on hunting and fighting like a real warrior. Instead of sulking the whole time, Riverpaw decided to take in the forest.

The pine trees stood tall and strong overhead, the smell filling the air and revitalizing Riverpaw spirit. She could hear rustling in the woods, was it prey? Or her fellow Clanmates out hunting? Riverpaw wanted to join them, she wanted to hunt!

In the distance, Riverpaw could he hear the rushing of the river. They grew closer and eventually Riverpaw spotted the sparkling surface of the water. There was a large pile of rocks in which Riverpaw could see green moss growing across the rough gray surface. "Collecting moss is a very important part of Clan life." Ripplestep explained.

Riverpaw rolled her eyes and flicked her tail in annoyance. *Yeah right. Moss doesn't keep the Clan fed, or fight our battles.* Riverpaw noticed Silverstripe's eyes resting on her. "You think differently?" Riverpaw didn't feel like arguing with her new mentor, even if she knew she was right so she just held her tongue but that didn't seem to please Silverstripe. Humor flashed in his eyes and looked at Riverpaw sternly. "Go ahead and tell me what you really think, Riverpaw. No matter what you say, you won't get in trouble. Speaking your mind is important."

Riverpaw groaned slightly and flicked her tail. "You say collecting moss is an important part of Clan life, but how important could it be? Moss doesn't hunt or feed the Clan and it certainly doesn't fight battles. Us warrior apprentices should be dedicating all of our time to fighting and hunting, not clawing moss off rocks."

Silverstripe exchanged an amused glance with Ripplestep. "Moss doesn't hunt, no, and it doesn't fight our battles. However, moss is used to stop bleeding after battles. It provides soft, warm nests to keep us comfortable while we rest. It keeps our kits safe with their mothers, and our elders comfortable and happy. I know moss doesn't seem important to you, being such a young, eager

apprentice and we don't really take notice of it most days, but moss *is* important."

"Alright, alright, I get it." Riverpaw groaned. *How many of those lectures am I going to have to sit through?* "Just teach me how to get it, okay?"

Silverstripe snorted and approached the rocks. "When gathering moss, you need to be careful to leave the dirt behind, or you'll have some cranky elders on your paws. Silverstripe extended his claws and slowly dragged them across the layer of moss. He peeled off a thin strip of moss and left behind a smaller layer of dirty, torn moss. "Don't go too fast or you'll get sloppy moss and you'll wrench your claws. Echopaw, give it a try."

Echopaw eagerly trotted up to the stones and copied what Silverstripe had done, she was left with a neat strip of moss and her green eyes beamed brightly. "Good work." Ripplestep praised. "Your turn, Riverpaw."

Let's get this over with. Riverpaw padded up to the stones and quickly dragged her claws across the surface, tearing off a large chunk of moss. *It's bigger than Echopaw's.* She thought boldly.

Silverstripe nudged the moss ball with his paws. "You took all of the dirt with you, this will not be welcomed by the elders. Try again." Riverpaw grit her teeth. *This is so stupid!* She tried several more times to make Silverstripe happy and by the time he was, her claws were sore.

Once they finally returned to camp, Riverpaw was ready to go to bed, praying that tomorrow would be better than today. *I'm wasting time by collecting moss.* "That wasn't so bad." Echopaw chimed in as they padded to the apprentice den.

"It was stupid and boring." Riverpaw growled. The entire time she had been annoyed because Echopaw's moss had been so good.

"I thought it was easy." Echopaw mewed, piling on to Riverpaw's irritation.

"Maybe you can dedicate your life to becoming a moss-gathering warrior then and *I'll* focus on the important things that matter." Riverpaw lashed her tail and stormed away from Echopaw, climbing into the apprentice den. Two nests had been made in the back of the den for the two of them, and she had to climb over every single other apprentice to get there.

She finally reached her nest and fell into it with a heavy sigh. Echopaw came in just behind her and curled up beside Riverpaw, who ignored her the best she could. *Tomorrow will be better. Tomorrow begins my real training.*

Chapter 6

"Say Graywillow comes to you with a belly ache, what will you do?" Eagleclaw questioned, looking at Moonpaw intensely.

"First I'd ask her if she had any other symptoms such as nausea or vomiting." Eagleclaw nodded slowly and Moonpaw. "If she doesn't have any other symptoms then I will give her water mint and tell her to rest. If she is vomiting then I will give her some willow leaves."

"Very good." Eagleclaw praised and Moonpaw held her head high. "What if Lionpaw comes to you with a thorn deep in his paw. He says it really hurts, but the thorn looks really small. Is he being dramatic? Or will you look deeper into it."

"I'll take him seriously. I'll give his paw a sniff to see if its infected or not. If it is, I will treat it with horsetail and cobweb and keep him off duties for the rest of the day. If it's not infected then I will lick his paw to get the thorn out, I'll then treat it with marigold to prevent and infection from forming."

"You're a quick learner." Eagleclaw twitched his tail. "Half a moon isn't a lot of time to learn everything, but you're on your way there. Soon you'll be even smarter than me, I'm sure of it."

"I doubt that." Moonpaw purred loudly as she rose to her paws. "You're the smartest medicine cat in the whole forest."

"I don't know about that." Eagleclaw snorted. "Do me a favor and take some ragwort and juniper to Cinderclaw. She's been complaining about stiff joints. It's amazing Sandnose's ears haven't fallen off from her constant talking."

Moonpaw purred in amusement, Eagleclaw was kind to her but barely had enough patience to deal with his Clanmates. During her first few days as an apprentice, she noticed how short Eagleclaw's temper was. He would snap easily, and she questioned why

Eagleclaw became a medicine cat in the first place if he didn't like dealing with annoying Clanmates, but when she saw him work she knew that Eagleclaw was an incredible medicine cat.

He was focuses, dutiful and had an amazing memory. He knew every herb and what it did while Moonpaw struggled to learn even half of them. She didn't complain, though, she absolutely loved learning. She loved helping her Clanmates, and she didn't mind all the little annoyances or getting ticks off with mouse bile. The elders had sharp tongues, but the sigh of relief each time is what made it all worth it.

Moonpaw gathered up the ragwort and quickly trotted to the medicine cat den, her tail waving behind her. As she crossed camp she took note of daily Clan life. Hollypaw and Mousepaw conversed over some prey while Heatherstorm watched over Lilykit and Graykit. Ivyheart organized patrols and the warriors happily listened and did what they were instructed to do.

Moonpaw approached the elder's den and poked her head inside where Cinderclaw and Sandnose were talking. Both old queens were resting in their nests, talking about SunClan's elder Fishtail. Sandnose noticed Moonpaw first and turned her attention towards her. "Oh hello, Moonpaw."

"Hello, you two." Moonpaw bowed her head, speaking through the ragwort. She set the herb down in front of Cinderclaw. "This is for you, courtesy of Eagleclaw."

Cinderclaw snorted and quickly ate the herb. "Honestly it's a good thing we have a cute little thing to look at now. I was starting to get sick of Eagleclaw and his attitude. Not to mention Featherstorm was older than dirt. It's refreshing to see such a pretty little apprentice."

Moonpaw's pelt burned at the compliment and her paws felt lighter. "Well, I'm glad I can be helpful." She purred. "If the two of you ever need anything, don't hesitate to ask." She waved her tail and left the elders to gossip. She reached the medicine cat den again and nodded towards Eagleclaw.

"How'd it go?" He questioned, setting out some leaves to dry.

"She said she was happy to see a friendly face." Moonpaw teased her mentor.

Eagleclaw snorted. "She's one to talk." Moonpaw just laughed. "Do you know what we are doing tonight?"

Moonpaw looked at her mentor in confusion. "No, I don't."

Eagleclaw's eyes showed a small glint of excitement in his eyes. "Tonight is the half-moon. We will be travelling to the Spirit Tree tonight."

Moonpaw felt a rush of excitement. "Really? I'm so excited, I've seen it in my dreams but--"

"Calm down." Eagleclaw said sternly. "We still have a whole day of work ahead of us, don't let your responsibilities slip away from you so easily."

"Right." Moonpaw steadied herself. *I'll still be exited, but I won't show it.* "What needs to be done?"

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"Is that everything?" Moonpaw questioned, looking around the medicine cat den, making sure all of her chores had been done.

"Is it?" Eagleclaw narrowed his eyes. "Did you set our herbs out to dry?"

"Yes."

"Did you organize the herb store?"

"Yes."

"Did you give herbs to Goldenstar?"

Moonpaw's ears drops. *Goldenstar needed herbs?* "Wha-no, I didn't know--"

Eagleclaw chuckled. "It's a joke, Moonpaw. Featherstorm did the

same thing to me my first time going to the Moonstone."

"Oh," Moonpaw breathed a sigh of relief. "Then everything is done."

"Let's be on our way, then." Eagleclaw began padding out of the medicine cat den and Moonpaw quickly followed. They ventured their way out of camp and swiftly into the forest. Moonpaw was welcomed by the sweet, sharp scent of the pine trees. She happily breathed in the air and followed her mentor. Eagleclaw always made sure to waste no time. They neared the gathering hollow border when they encountered a patrol led by Dustclaw, he was leading Robinflight, Hollypaw, Owlstorm, Scorchlight, Silverstripe and Riverpaw. Moonpaw met her sister's gaze as their paths crossed.

"Where are you going?" Riverpaw questioned, approaching Moonpaw eagerly.

"The Moonstone." Moonpaw purred happily. "It's the half-moon."

"That's awesome!" Riverpaw exclaimed, her blue eyes burning. "You have to tell me all about it when you get back!"

"If you're awake." Eagleclaw spoke up. "Come on, Moonpaw. We don't have time to waste."

"Bye, Riverpaw!" Moonpaw called to her sister and quickly followed her mentor. They reached the river and Moonpaw looked at the water feeling slightly nervous. However, the skies were clear and the water was still. Flowing slowly across the bank.

"We cross using these stepping stones." Eagleclaw looked at several, flat stones that made an easy path across the river. "They're easy to cross, especially during greenleaf." Eagleclaw stepped onto the stones and crossed, upon reaching the other side he looked over his shoulder. "Now you."

Moonpaw confidently stepped forward, stepping on the smooth stones. She stepped from stone to stone until she reached the soft sand on the other side. "That's the path we take for gatherings as well." Eagelclaw turned and began heading towards the gathering

hollow. Moonpaw followed into the sparse forest.She could see the large hollow where the four Clans would gather. "Next time you come here, this hollow will be full of cats."

"I'm excited." Moonpaw purred happily. "But I think I'm more excited for the Moonstone."

"It's an incredible experience." They passed the gathering hollow and neared the other river, but this area was thin enough to jump across. "We're in MoonClan territory now, we'll head towards the Spirit Woods border, we'll probably meet up with the others."

The strange scent of moorland and heather filled Moonpaw's nose. She found it almost suffocating. *How do MoonClan cats handle this?* Another scent filled Moonpaw's nose as they walked along the river. She looked to her side and saw two cats padding through on the other side of the river, coming from LichenClan territory.

"Who's that?"

"Sagefeather and Stormpaw." Eagleclaw explained. Both she-cats were gray, but one of them was much younger and the older one had long, fluffy fur.

Moonpaw could see the ghostly white trees in the distance, the trees she saw in her dreams when she was a kit. There was a lone shape of a cat near the river, he looked over his shoulder as Moonpaw and Eagleclaw approached.

"Greetings." He bowed his head, his yellow eyes resting on Moonpaw. "Who's this?"

"Moonpaw, my new apprentice." Eagleclaw explained curtly.

"So soon after Featherstorm's death." The medicine cat pointed out. "You're very young to be taking on an apprentice, Eagleclaw."

"When I take on an apprentice is not your concern, Skyclaw." Eagleclaw growled. "And Moonpaw is an exceptional apprentice, even with how little training she's had."

"I didn't mean to assume anything." Skyclaw bowed his head. His

gaze drifted behind him and rested on something behind Moonpaw. She turned to see two more cats approaching the group. One was a silver tabby tom and a golden she-cat.

"Good evening everyone." The tom called, once again looking at Moonpaw. "You have an apprentice, Eagleclaw?"

Eagleclaw nodded stiffly. "Yes, this is Moonpaw. She became an apprentice about half a moon ago."

"It's nice to meet you, Moonpaw." The SunClan tom dipped his head. "My name is Feathernose, and this is my apprentice Honeypaw."

"Hello." Moonpaw dipped her head respectfully.

"It's nice to meet you." Honeypaw purred happily, her voice sweet.

"And here comes Sagefeather and Stormpaw." Eagleclaw looked towards LichenClan territory as both cats bounded over the river. After one final introduction, the medicine cats continued on their way into the Spirit Woods.

She was soon surrounded by the pale trees, the moonlight now reflecting off their bark and making them glow. She heard faint whispers in her ear, she almost felt scared. *I saw them in my dreams, but it doesn't compare to this.*

In the distance a giant birch tree rose from the ground, it's roots twisting away and making way towards the tree. "Stay close to me." Eagleclaw spoke quietly to Moonpaw and they stepped into the pitch black tunnel.

Moonpaw followed Eagleclaw closely as he took the lead into the dark tunnel. She could sense Feathernose behind her. It didn't take long for light to completely vanish as the medicine cats were consumed by darkness. Moonpaw's steps were shaky, and she felt fear weighing on her chest. She forced herself to remain calm and followed her mentor into the tunnel.

At long last, a faint shed of light came into view and the narrow tunnel opened into a massive cavern. In the center was a pristine

stone, though it wasn't lit up. She glanced upwards and saw an opening in the ceiling above, she could see the moon inching closer.

"It will be moonhigh soon." Eagleclaw said. "Once it is, we will hold your ceremony."

"My ceremony?" Moonpaw questioned. "I already had a ceremony."

"You were made an apprentice before your Clan, as a medicine cat you need to me made an apprentice before StarClan. This is your true ceremony."

As he spoke, the moon overtook the sky and the stone illuminated. It shone with a brilliant silver light, Moonpaw felt her heartbeat quicken as she stared into the shimmering surface. "It is time." Eagleclaw spoke up. Moonpaw faced her mentor, the rest of the medicine cats sat down, watching Moonpaw intently. "Are you ready?"

"Yes." Moonpaw replied and held her head high.

"Moonpaw, is it your wish to enter the mysteries of StarClan as a medicine cat?"

"It is." Moonpaw spoke boldly.

"Then come forward." Moonpaw took a step closer towards her mentor. "Warriors of StarClan, I present you with this apprentice. She has chosen the path of a medicine cat. Grant them your wisdom and insight so that she may understand your ways and heal her Clan in accordance with your will." Moonpaw felt a strange feeling overcome her. *I'm a real medicine cat apprentice now.* "Now, touch your nose to the surface of the Moonstone and StarClan will come to you."

Moonpaw turned away, approaching the beautiful stone. She laid down, tucking her paws underneath her chest. Taking a deep breath, Moonpaw touched her nose to the surface. A sharp cold sensation spread through her body and in an instant, Moonpaw slipped into slumber.

Moonpaw opened her eyes, but she was no longer in the cavern

with the Moonstone. She was outside the Spirit Tree, the half-moon shimmering beautifully overhead. Moonpaw rose to her paws, she expected someone to be here with her.

"Greetings, Moonpaw." Moonpaw jumped and spun around as an unfamiliar voice spoke her name. She saw a slender gray she-cat with a long, fluffy tail.

"Who are--" Moonpaw spoke, then had a realization. "You're Featherstorm, aren't you."

"I am." The she-cat nodded. "I only knew you when you were a kit, and I knew you were destined to take my place as medicine cat."

"Did you send me the signs?" Moonpaw questioned. "The feather?"

Featherstorm nodded. "It was mostly for Eagleclaw, but I wanted to put the idea of being a medicine cat inside of your head. It was your destiny."

"How did you know?" Moonpaw questioned.

"StarClan told me." Featherstorm explained. "On the night you and your sisters were born. You all have a destiny, though their's isn't as clear as yours."

"Can you tell me about them?" Moonpaw asked eagerly, she wanted to know what lied in her sister's destinies.

"One of them will follow a dark, twisted path." Moonpaw tensed. "The other will overcome terrible struggles to shine amongst her Clanmates."

"How do I stop one of them from following this dark path? Can I stop them?"

"Destiny isn't always set in stone." Feathernose explained. "Help to guide your sisters, they will be relying on you for a bright future. The three of you are the future of AshClan, and you must do everything it takes to serve your Clan."

"I will." Moonpaw vowed. "I won't let anything bad happen to my

sisters, I promise."

Chapter 7

"Graypaw! Lilypaw! Graypaw! Lilypaw!" The cats of AshClan cheered their new apprentices, but Riverpaw really couldn't care less about the whole thing. The apprentice den was already crowded enough. Her paws were itching to get out into the territory and train. The meeting finally broke off and Riverpaw rushed up to Silverstripe who was talking with Graywillow.

"Silverstripe!" She called her mentors name. "Can we go out hunting now? Or battle training? I'm so bored."

"We'll go out later, Riverpaw." Silverstripe mewed sternly. When she let out a groan he added. "The day is still young, we'll have plenty of time, plus you need to work on your night hunting."

"Only MoonClan cats hunt at night." Riverpaw pointed out, flicking her tail in annoyance.

"Sometimes AshClan cats have to as well." Silverstripe's voice grew sharp. "Now I said we will go out later, be patient." Riverpaw turned away letting out a heavy sigh. She looked around camp, hoping for something to do. The first thing she saw was Duskwhisker sitting outside the nursery talking with her mate, Owlstorm. The she-cat was the newest nursery residence, soon to be having kits. *Like we need anymore.* Riverpaw thought bitterly. She hoped she would be a warrior by the time the little things became apprentices.

She knew that Lionpaw and Hazelpaw were approaching their warrior ceremonies and Mudpaw and Cloverpaw wouldn't be far behind them. Riverpaw had been an apprentice for two moons now, and she was already eager to become a warrior. She hated being told what to do, she hated being told she couldn't go out and hunt.

Movement caught Riverpaw's eyes and she spotted Lionpaw and Hazelpaw padding towards the camp entrance, with no mentors. Feeling curious, Riverpaw ran after them. "Where are you guys

going?" She questioned.

"We're going hunting." Hazelpaw explained.

"Without your mentors?" Riverpaw asked.

Lionpaw nodded. "They're busy, so they told us to go out on our own. We're almost warriors after all."

"Can I come with you?" Riverpaw asked, glancing over her shoulder to make sure Silverstripe couldn't see or hear her. "I feel like I'm going crazy."

"Are you sure Silverstripe would be alright with that?" Hazelpaw questioned with concern in her voice.

"Yeah, he's busy talking with Graywillow anyway. He would want me to go out and do something useful instead of sitting around camp. Plus, like you said, you guys are almost warriors, right?"

"I guess." Hazelpaw seemed unsure, but Lionpaw didn't seem to have any issues about it.

"Alright, let's get going then." Lionpaw mewed, together the three of them padded out in the future. *I don't have time to waste sitting around camp chit catting like some hen.* Riverpaw thought, holding her head high. *Leaf-bare is coming quickly, and I need my skills to be sharpened.*

Riverpaw followed the two siblings into the pine trees, breathing in the sweet scent of AshClan territory. "So how's your training going so far, Riverpaw?" Lionpaw questioned as they padded through the forest.

"Good," Riverpaw replied. "I just wish Silverstripe had the energy I did. I could train all day long and he always limits me. It's frustrating."

"Silverstripe may not have been the best choice of mentor for you," Hazelpaw pointed out. "Silverstripe is a very skilled and patient cat, but you have far too much energy for him. Frankly you need someone who can discipline you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Riverpaw wrinkled her nose.

"Riverpaw you're arrogant," Lionpaw said bluntly. "You need someone to knock you on your tail from time to time."

Riverpaw snorted. "Whatever, I just have the heart of a natural born warrior. That's what Jayclaw tells me. I'm going to be leader some day you know."

"That's exactly what we're talking about." Hazelpaw sighed. "Arrogance can only get you so far. If you don't think you need to improve, then you'll fall behind all the other apprentices."

"I'm already so far *ahead* of all the other apprentices." Riverpaw hissed. "The other day I caught more prey than both Mudpaw *and* Cloverpaw."

Lionpaw stopped and faced Riverpaw. "Hunting only says so much," He mewed. "How much battle training have you had?"

"I've had enough." Riverpaw lashed her tail. "I could take on any of the other apprentices."

"Alright." Lionpaw snorted, puffing out his chest. "Fight me then, I'm almost a full warrior so test your skills against me."

Riverpaw felt a fire ignite inside her. "You're on." She bared her teeth. "I'll win and then I can tell every other apprentice that I beat you."

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Lionpaw?" Hazelpaw questioned, looking around nervously. "Last thing we need is one of you getting hurt."

"No claws or teeth will be used." Lionpaw assured her. "It won't take long, promise."

"Alright," Hazelpaw seemed unsure, but didn't complain anymore.

"Let's get on with it already." Riverpaw rolled her eyes. In an instant, Lionpaw leapt forward, a bolt of golden fur. Lionpaw's larger body slammed into hers and pinned her to the ground.

Riverpaw let out a hiss of pain and struggled underneath his weight.

"You giving up already?" Lionpaw taunted.

"Not on your life." Riverpaw grit her teeth, she tucked in her hind legs and dug her hind paws into Lionpaw's belly. He let out a gasp and loosened his grip on Riverpaw. She squirmed out from under him and whipped around on her paws, leaping onto his back and getting a good grip on his shoulders.

"You're quick." Lionpaw said in a huff. Riverpaw focused, using her weight to throw Lionpaw off balance. He fell to the ground and Riverpaw jumped off, twisting on her hind paws and bringing her paw down on his head, simulating an attack. Lionpaw got back on his paws and moved quickly towards her. Riverpaw didn't have time to dodge as Lionpaw shoved his head against her chest, throwing her up against a pine tree. There was a rain of pine needles down on them and the air was shoved out of Riverpaw's chest.

She dropped to the floor, her entire body sore but refused to give up. She rose to her paws and faced Lionpaw with a fierce hiss. She ran forward, getting ready to attack him once again.

"What in the name of StarClan is going on here?" A sharp, anger filled voice filled the area. Riverpaw skidded to a stop, crashing into Lionpaw. She jumped to her paws and saw that Eagleclaw and Moonpaw had shown up. "Is this what warrior apprentices waste their time doing? Where are your mentors?"

"Our mentors told me and Lionpaw to go hunting." Hazelpaw explained quickly.

"This doesn't look like hunting to me." Eagleclaw growled, his sharp amber eyes turned to Riverpaw, burning into her pelt. "What about you?"

"Uh, I--" She cleared her throat. "Silverstripe didn't want to come out, so I came out with them instead."

"Did Silverstripe give you permission to do this? And did he give you permission to have a fight instead of hunting?" Riverpaw flattened her ears. "Lionpaw and Hazelpaw, continue with your hunting and I *will* be telling your mentors about this."

Both apprentices lowered their heads and turned away, vanishing into the pine trees. "As for you, Riverpaw, you'll be heading back to camp with us and I'm sure that Silverstripe will be thrilled to hear about what you did."

"We were just training?" Riverpaw argued. "All Silverstripe wants to do is sit around and talk all day. I'm a warrior apprentice, I have training that needs to be done!"

"You are an apprentice Riverpaw, and that means you listen to what your mentor tells you to do. You are not a warrior, you're a foolish apprentice. Now get back to camp." Eagleclaw hissed.

Riverpaw lowered her head and followed Eagleclaw and Moonpaw, she purposefully ignored her sister's concerned glances. *Who does this stupid medicine cat think he is?* She thought sourly. *He's not my mentor.*

The three of them reached camp and Riverpaw came face to face with Silverstripe. Upon seeing them, the silver tom ran up to Riverpaw. "I've been looking all over for you." He mewed, sounding exasperated. "Where did you go?"

"Go on and tell him, Riverpaw." Eagleclaw growled.

Riverpaw flattened her ears again. *You know what? No. I won't be ashamed of myself.* She lifted her head. "While you were busy chatting like a starling, I decided to make use of my time and went out with Lionpaw and Hazelpaw."

"Lionpaw and Hazelpaw were out hunting," Eagleclaw chimed in. *Just shut up!* Riverpaw lashed her tail. "But I found her and Lionpaw fighting."

"It was training." Riverpaw hissed. "Not like you'd understand." She growled under her breath.

"Keep mouthing off and I'll show you the training I've had." Eagleclaw spat. *I'll gladly take on a stupid medicine cat.* Eagleclaw looked back at Silverstripe. "I don't envy you, Silverstripe. Come now, Moonpaw, we have better things to do than argue with your sister."

Moonpaw followed her mentor, casting a nervous glance over her shoulder. Riverpaw ignored her sister and focused on Silverstripe who looked increasingly more annoyed. "Riverpaw, I understand you wanted to go out and hunt but that's not your call to make. It's mine, I'm your mentor and whether you like it or not you have to listen to me."

"Well I don't like it!" Riverpaw raised her voice. She noticed the cats of AshClan were watching her. *I don't care.* "I want a mentor who actually wants to keep up with me, a mentor who will actually *train* me."

"Well I'm the mentor that was given to you." Silverstripe lashed his tail. "I've tried being patient with you, but I've had enough. I don't reward this kind of attitude, Riverpaw. For the next moon you'll be doing nothing but gathering moss and taking the ticks of the elders."

Riverpaw's eyes went wide. *He can't do that to me!* "That's not fair!" She cried.

"I don't care, Riverpaw." Silverstripe hissed. "Maybe being confined to camp will teach you some discipline, and you can forget about going to any gatherings any time soon. I'm sick of your arrogance."

Anger burned inside of Riverpaw like a raging fire. "I hate you!" She lashed out. "I wish any other cat could've been my mentor!" Without thinking, Riverpaw spun around and ran into the apprentice den. Anger raged inside of her, she felt humiliated. *How could he do this to me?* Riverpaw thought. *Stupid, Silverstripe! Stupid mentor!* She fell into her nest, burying her face in the moss. *Why can't any cat see the potential I have? I just want to show what I can do!*

Chapter 8

"Oh, that feels so much better." Sandnose mewed happily, stretching out her foreleg. "I must say, you were lacking at first but now you're the best when it comes to removing ticks."

Riverpaw snorted. "Don't think that's what I want to be known for, but thanks." She moved on to Cinderclaw who had a tick near the base of her tail. She applied the mouse bile to the tick and watched as it removed itself from her gray pelt.

"Any idea when this punishment of yours will be up?" Cinderclaw questioned as Riverpaw began cleaning up her mouse bile supply. "It's been a whole moon."

"No idea." Riverpaw sighed. "Silverstripe hasn't really said anything to me other than telling me when to come do this."

"You were quite nasty to him," Sandnose added. *Thanks. I noticed.* Riverpaw held her tongue despite wanting to make a sour retort. "It's not all your fault, though, Riverpaw. You have the type of energy that can't be contained in camp all day long." Riverpaw lifted her head slightly. *She gets it.*

"Frankly I don't think Goldenstar made the best choice when she made Silverstripe your mentor. Silverstripe is a great cat, don't get me wrong, but he's not the right match for you. I just hope the two of you can make it through the rest of your apprenticeship without tearing each other's ears off!" Sandnose and Cinderclaw shared a laugh and Riverpaw joined in.

That's if this punishment ever gets over with. "Do you two need anything else?" She questioned. "Prey? More moss?"

"No, we're quite alright, Riverpaw." Sandnose purred. "Thank you, though."

Riverpaw nodded and carried the stick with mouse bile out of the

elders den. She discarded the remainder and washed her paws. She had grown used to the scent over the past moon, and she spent most of her time with Sandnose and Cinderclaw. They weren't bad company, but Riverpaw hated being trapped in camp.

"Done hanging out with your best friends?" Riverpaw heard a snide remark coming from Cloverpaw who had Mudpaw cackling beside her. *And worst of all, all the other apprentices are making fun of me.* She flicked her tail in annoyance and crossed camp to get some moss for Duskwhisker.

She reached the medicine cat den where Eagleclaw and Moonpaw were sorting herbs. Riverpaw began gathering a bundle of moss for the queen. "Hey, Riverpaw." Moonpaw greeted. Riverpaw didn't bother responding, she hadn't talked to her sisters much either lately.

"Apparently all this mouse bile has made you mute." Eagleclaw snorted from where he sat. *Getting real sick of his retorts.* Riverpaw twitched her ear and set down her moss.

"I had a mouthful of moss and I'm trying to not waste any time. That's what you're all about, right?" Eagleclaw just scoffed and got back to work. Riverpaw sighed and looked at Moonpaw. "Sorry, Moonpaw. I'm just trying to get this all done today."

"It's okay." Moonpaw dipped her head. "If you need any help, just let me know."

"Thanks." Riverpaw picked up her moss and headed towards the nursery. She delivered the moss to the pregnant Duskwhisker and moved on. Her daily chores were now done and it was just past sunhigh. She sat down in front of the apprentice den to take a break and have a small mouse.

As Riverpaw finished with her prey, she spotted Silverstripe padding up to her. *Great.* She thought. *Wonder what new task he has for me now.* Riverpaw raised her head to face her mentor. "I just talked to Sandnose and Cinderclaw." He mewed, Riverpaw listened. "They told me how good of a job you've been doing lately, and I'm proud of you."

"Thanks." Riverpaw did her best to make it sound like she cared.

"I didn't think you had it in you to actually put in some hard work," Silverstripe added. *A compliment backed by an insult.* "The point is, I'm inviting you to come on patrol with me."

Riverpaw suddenly jumped to her paws. "Really? I can go out with you?"

Silverstripe raised his tail, slowing her down. "Yes, depending on how well you listen and behave on this patrol will determine if your punishment is over."

Riverpaw wanted so badly to get back into training, she felt like she was falling behind even Echopaw. "Alright," She nodded. "I'll behave."

"I sure hope so." Silverstripe's voice grew softer. "Now let's get going, we're wasting daylight. The two of them met up with Berryleaf, Hazelpaw, Heatherstorm, Graywillow and Mousepaw.

"You get to go come with, Riverpaw?" Hazelpaw questioned as Riverpaw approached with Silverstripe.

"Yeah," Riverpaw said, struggling to hide her excitement.

"I'm glad to have you with us, then." Hazelpaw purred loudly. "I know you've been going crazy being all cooped up in camp."

"You have no idea." Riverpaw chuckled, her paws itched to get out and walk AshClan territory. She had only been allowed to gather moss outside camp. With Graywillow at the lead, the patrol set out into AshClan territory.

Riverpaw breathed in the sweet scent of pine trees, and though her paws itched to run she kept herself composed, walking beside Silverstripe. She could tell right away that they were patrolling SunClan territory. The crossed the pine forest, in the distance Riverpaw could hear the rushing of the river. She could see the oak trees of SunClan territory starting to shift into shades of brown, red and gold as leaf-fall overtook the forest.

Riverpaw sniffed the air, the scent of SunClan getting stronger, but another scent caught her attention. It was foul, and made the fur on her spine stand up. Her travel mates didn't seem to notice the scent, but Silverstripe noticed her.

"Everything alright, Riverpaw?" He questioned.

"I don't know." Riverpaw admitted. "Something smells strange." At her words the patrol stopped and the group of cats began sniffing the air.

"I smell it too." Berryleaf mewed. "It's fox."

"A fox?" Mousepaw mewed. "Is it close?"

"It's definitely within our territory." Graywillow explained. "We can't let it stay, with leaf-bare approaching it could move in closer to camp. Kits make good prey for a fox, so do young apprentices."

"What should we do, then?" Heatherstorm questioned.

"I say we track it down," Silverstripe mewed. "We're a large patrol, if it's small enough we could drive it out without risking it getting closer to us."

Graywillow nodded. "Let's track it then," The she-cat ordered. "Stay quite and stay close together, last thing we need is one of us getting caught off guard." The patrol bundled together as they began tracking the fox. Riverpaw's heart began racing. *I might fight a fox!* She thought, but she had been out of training for a whole moon she wasn't sure how she would compare with her Clanmates.

They tracked through the forest until the scent was overwhelming. On Riverpaw's side she noticed a pile of fox dung, she wrinkled her nose at the foul scent. "We're close." Graywillow announced. "Stay alert."

They came to a small clearing where Riverpaw saw the shredded remains of a half-eaten squirrel. *Disgusting creature.* Riverpaw thought. Then she finally spotted the fox. It was sitting in the clearing, sniffing the ground. From where they stood, Riverpaw could see its ribcage poking out through its matted, scarred pelt.

"It's small," Graywillow noted. "We can drive it out, but still, even the smallest of foxes can be deadly if you make the wrong step." She faced the patrol. "Mousepaw and Riverpaw, I want you two to keep away from its jaws. Be a nuisance, claw its sides and legs." *I can do that.* Riverpaw shared a nod of confirmation with Mousepaw. "Attack when I give the signal."

The waited silently in the trees, Riverpaw unsheathed her claws, she was ready to tear this fox apart. Graywillow opened her mouth and let out a loud caterwaul, at that sound the AshClan patrol exploded out of the pine trees and swarmed the fox.

The fox let out cries of alarm as it was swarmed by warriors. Riverpaw ran up to the side of the fox and raked her claws down the side of its red pelt. She drew blood to the surface and it jumped to the side where Mousepaw was waiting, he sank his teeth into its lower hind leg, it kicked desperately but Hazelpaw was on its other leg.

Berryleaf and Heatherstorm sank their claws into the fox's shoulders, it swung its head wildly, letting out shrill cries of pain. *This is going to be easy.* When Graywillow and Silverstripe rushed the fox's face, it began to panic. The fox bucked its entire body wildly, shaking Mousepaw and Hazelpaw off. It lashed out with large forepaws, knocking Graywillow to the side. The she-cat was briefly stunned, but quickly recovered.

Riverpaw could tell the fox was getting desperate as it spun around, snapping helplessly at the warriors that battered its body with their claws. *Just run you dumb thing!* Riverpaw thought and ran in again, ready to shred its disgusting pelt some more. Right as Riverpaw reached the fox, it lashed out with a paw and hit her directly in the chest.

The air rushed out of her body and Riverpaw landed on her back. She locked eyes with the maddened creature and saw pure bloodlust in its eyes. Riverpaw struggled to get back on her paws, but she felt winded. *StarClan, help me!* She cried as the fox charged towards her.

It placed a paw on her stomach and shoved her down against the

ground, snarling loudly. It's foul breath was almost too much for Riverpaw to handle. It's broken, yet razor sharp teeth were rearing to rip into her small body. She could hear yowls from her Clanmates and noticed Graywillow was now on the fox's box, lashing wildly with her claws.

Silverstripe came in from the side, raking his claws down the fox's face. The fox roared in pain and let Riverpaw go, she rolled over on her side, struggling to catch her breath. She looked towards the fight, her vision blurry.

Silverstripe faced the fox, raising his forepaw and hissing loudly. The fox moved in an orange blur and Riverpaw heard a choked cry from her mentor. She forced her vision to focus only to see the fox sinking its teeth into Silverstripe's neck. *No!* She cried out in her head, Riverpaw forced herself to stand up. *I have to help him.*

She clumsily ran forward towards her mentor, feeling panic rise in her chest. The fox threw Silverstripe to the side, blood poured from his throat, pooling on the ground. Riverpaw met his eyes, they were dull and lifeless. *No.*

A sudden forced knocked Riverpaw to the side, she hadn't noticed the fox swinging its paw at her. Riverpaw's body hit the side of a pine tree, her head slamming against the bark. Before she could even hit the ground, Riverpaw's world fell to darkness.

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All Riverpaw could see was Silverstripe's empty gaze, his lifeless eyes staring in to hers. Her entire body hurt, but the world around her was black. Riverpaw forced her eyes to finally open, her vision was hazy but the scent of herbs helped her realize she was in the medicine cat den. Riverpaw focused on her surroundings, she could hear voices outside the den.

"Eagleclaw, please," *Mistypool.* Her mother's voice sounded frantic. "I need to make sure she's alright."

"Mistypool, she's fine." Eagelclaw sounded annoyed and exhausted. "She doesn't have any major injures, she was just knocked out."

"She's been out for a whole day!" *I have?*

"She woke up several times last night, actually." Eagleclaw corrected her. *I did?* "But she was in pain and crying out for Silverstripe. I gave her poppy seeds and thyme to help her sleep and to calm her down. She watched her mentor die, for StarClan's sake."

Pain seared through Riverpaw's heart. *Silverstripe is dead.* She buried her nose in her paws. "I will send for you when Riverpaw is awake, Mistypool. Let me work, please." Riverpaw closed her eyes, guilt rushing over her. "Oh, you are awake." Eagleclaw said, causing Riverpaw to lift her head. "How do you feel?"

"Silverstripe is dead?" She questioned, shocked at how dry her voice was.

Eagleclaw sighed. "Yes, Riverpaw. I'm sorry, the fox killed him almost instantly."

Riverpaw dropped her head. "I said such horrible things to him." She whimpered. "I said I hated him, and that I wished he wasn't my mentor but this isn't what I wanted." She felt herself getting overwhelmed. "I never wanted this."

"Riverpaw," Eagleclaw said, his voice surprisingly soft. "Silverstripe knows you didn't hate him, you had a complicated relationship but I'm sure he's not angry with you. You can't dwell on the past or let it consume you, that's not what Silverstripe would want."

Riverpaw silenced herself, she knew that Eagleclaw was right but she just couldn't shake the guilt that clawed at her heart. *I'm going to get a new mentor, and no matter what, I'll be a good for apprentice for them. The kind of apprentice I should've been for Silverstripe.*

Chapter 9

Riverpaw rose to her paws, her entire body still felt sore but she had no injures. Along with her aches, her heart felt heavy. Today would be the day she received her new mentor and her training continued. She had struggled with her emotions ever since she learned that Silverstripe died. She regretted the things she had said to him a moon ago, she would give anything just to apologize to him.

As her emotions started swelling up inside, Riverpaw shook her head. *No. Warriors don't have regrets. We only move forward.* Riverpaw dared to step outside the apprentice den, once Eagleclaw had cleared her she moved back in with the rest of her denmates. Silverstripe's kits, Rainpaw and Windpaw, were incredibly heartbroken over the loss of their father. Riverpaw wanted to check on them, but she didn't think it was her place.

They say me tell Silverstripe that I hated him. She flattened her ears. *I hate feeling this way.* She took a deep breath and looked around camp, it wasn't quite time for the ceremony but she knew that it would be soon. "Hey, Riverpaw." A solemn voice spoke her name, causing Riverpaw to look to her side. It was Rainpaw.

Riverpaw tensed slightly. "Hi, Rainpaw." She greeted softly. "What do you need?"

"I just wanted to make sure that you're doing alright," She checked. "I know you and my father didn't get along the best, but he was still your mentor. I would be devastated if Tawnyfrost died."

"I'm...doing alright." Riverpaw replied. "I just wish I could've been a better apprentice for him."

Rainpaw's blue eyes softened. "I'm sure he wished he could've been a better mentor to you, but I know he won't be angry. I heard him talking to our mother, he said all he wanted was to help you to become a warrior that AshClan could be proud of."

Riverpaw lowered her head. "I hope I can still become that, for his sake."

"I'm sure that you can." Rainpaw rested her tail on Rainpaw's shoulder. "You have the spirit of an incredible warrior."

"Thank you, Rainpaw." Riverpaw said, her spirits feeling lifted. *I can't let Silverstripe's death drag me down forever. I'll be a warrior that AshClan can be proud of, just like he wanted.*

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!" While the two of them had been talking, Goldenstar and Ivyheart had gathered for the meeting.

"I guess this is it." Riverpaw sighed. She wondered who her new mentor would be, there weren't many options. Even Lilypaw had been given Ivyheart as a mentor, which wasn't very common. Riverpaw caught the eyes of her parents who watched from the sidelines. Jayclaw gave her a reassuring nod.

Riverpaw took another deep breath and ventured towards the crowd, all eyes were on her. She held her head high and sat down in the center, meeting Goldenstar's bright green eyes. "I've called this meeting because the tragic death of Silverstripe left one of our apprentices without a mentor. His death is tragic, and will be felt for many moons to come, but the training of our apprentices must continue." The Clan lowered their heads, holding a short moment of silence for Silverstripe.

"When I originally chose Silverstripe as Riverpaw's mentor, I had hoped his calm and patient personality would help with Riverpaw's energy and ambition." Riverpaw's pelt burned slightly. "I see now that's not the way I should've gone. Riverpaw needs a mentor who will work her hard, someone who will test her limits." Goldenstar stared intently at Riverpaw. "That's why, Riverpaw's new mentor will be me."

Riverpaw's jaw dropped, she heard various gasps from her Clanmates. Riverpaw realized what Goldenstar was waiting for and jumped to her paws. She faced her leader and touched her muzzle to Goldenstar's. Afterwards, the cats of AshClan cheered and

Riverpaw faced her mentor mentor. *I can't believe my mentor is Goldenstar! She's the most incredible cat in all of AshClan!*

"You're really going to be my mentor?" Riverpaw questioned once the ceremony had gone down.

"I am." Goldenstar purred happily. "I haven't mentored an apprentice since before I became deputy. Now, let's not waste any time. You're already behind." Riverpaw held her high and followed Goldenstar as she ventured out into AshClan territory.

"I was hoping that Silverstripe would teach you teach your discipline by making you do menial tasks, but I can see now that's not what you need." Goldenstar explained as the two of them moved swiftly through the forest, Riverpaw was nearly running in order to keep up with the leader. "What I see now," Goldenstar came to a stop, Riverpaw nearly crashed into her but she recovered quickly. "Is that you need a mentor who will work you incredibly hard." She looked over her shoulder, green eyes sparking.

"I want you to go hunting, and do not stop until I come find you. Do not stop, catch as much as you can."

Riverpaw nodded, glancing up at the sky. It was just past sunhigh, she wondered how long Goldenstar would have her hunting for, but she knew she shouldn't keep her mentor waiting. Riverpaw set out into the forest, sniffing the air and trying to pick out the scent of prey between the bitter cold scent of frost and the pine needles.

She finally caught the scent of squirrel and tracked the creature down. It had been quite a long time since she hunted, but she was sure she would be able to catch it. She spotted the squirrel at the base of one of the pine trees.

She dropped into a hunting crouch and stalked her prey. When the moment felt right, Riverpaw charged forward. The squirrel caught on to her quickly and sprinted up the side of the tree. Riverpaw skidded to a stop, kicking up a flurry of pine needles. *Fox dung!* She cursed underneath her breath. *I really am out of practice.*

Riverpaw refused to dwell on her missed catch and continued with

her hunt. She caught the scent of a mouse and tracked it down. The tiny animal was nibbling on some pine nuts. Forcing herself to be more careful, Riverpaw crept forward. When the time felt right, she leapt. Her paws landed clumsily on the mouse, but she killed it nonetheless. *Not my best work.* Riverpaw thought with a flick of her ears. *But at least it's caught.* Riverpaw was certain that Goldenstar was watching her, so she had to show her mentor and leader that she was a capable hunter despite being confined to camp for a moon.

Riverpaw continued her hunt, catching two more squirrels before reaching the SunClan border. The stench of SunClan's territory was almost hiding all the prey, but she worked around it and managed to catch another mouse. She padded away from the SunClan border and skirted along the river where she managed to catch two voles.

She was starting to wonder when Goldenstar was going to come get her, she had been hunting for a long time now. However, Riverpaw didn't complain, she just kept hunting. As she crept along the river bank, Riverpaw caught the scent of sparrow. She had only practiced catching birds once or twice, but she could show Goldenstar how great of a hunter she was if she caught it!

Riverpaw tracked down the bird, it was near a cluster of pine trees, its back turned to Riverpaw. *If I can do this, then she'll have to be proud of me.* Riverpaw licked her lips and moved forward silently. She noticed a lose stone that would surely alert the sparrow to her presence. Riverpaw avoided the stone and readied herself to pounce.

She leapt forward, pinning and killing the sparrow before it even had a chance to take off. *Perfect.* She thought proudly, holding her head high. She half expected Goldenstar to come out and tell her she was done, but nothing happened. Riverpaw was still alone. *Guess I'm still hunting.*

Riverpaw pressed forward along the river, now nearing the LichenClan border. The sun was starting to fall and Riverpaw feared she might be doing this all night. *Goldenstar is just testing me.* Riverpaw thought. *I'll hunt until my paws fall off if I have to!* Riverpaw continued her hunt, catching two more squirrels and two

more mice. She was next to the LichenClan border when she caught yet another squirrel.

Her paws were starting to ache from all the walking she had done, she had covered pretty much all of AshClan territory except for the back end behind camp, which is where she was headed next. She knew Eagle Stones was behind the camp, but she hadn't been allowed to hunt there yet as it was a dangerous hunting site.

The eagles that gave the stones their names were long gone, but the stones were tall and jagged, a clumsy apprentice would surely break their neck hunting on these stones. She also knew on the back border of AshClan territory, the border that lead to the twolegplace contained a broken down, abandoned twoleg nest. Again, apprentices were warned away from there due to the threat of rats.

One or two rats weren't an issue, but a whole pack of rats could easily kill a cat of her size. Riverpaw told herself she would stay off of the stones and keep clear of the twoleg nest, she didn't quite feel like dying today. She reached the back area of the territory and on her way caught another mouse.

She caught a shrew and her paws were sore, her legs aching from all the walking she did. It was dusk now, and night wasn't far behind. As the sun fell, the air grew colder, biting at Riverpaw's nose and eartips. She caught another squirrel and at long last Goldenstar appeared. "Good work, Riverpaw." She praised. "You can stop now."

Riverpaw slumped down, feeling incredibly exhausted. "Thank you, Goldenstar."

"You did well. You struggled in the beginning but you were eventually catching prey like a seasoned warrior, and you never stopped."

"I don't know if I have the energy to cross the entire territory again to collect it all again."

"Don't worry about it." Goldenstar purred. "I've been collecting it as you go, it's all buried near the camp."

"Thank you." Riverpaw breathed a sigh of relief.

Goldenstar chuckled. "Was that too much for you? I thought you liked hunting."

Riverpaw lifted her head, despite feeling so exhausted and sore, Riverpaw knew she had honed in on her skills, she had improved her hunting technique and best of all, she had gotten to cross all of AshClan territory herself.

"No," Riverpaw stood up, her muscles complaining with each movement. "It wasn't too much, I would've kept going all night if I needed."

"I'm glad to hear that." Goldenstar's eyes sparkled. "Because we're only getting started. When we get back to camp, get some prey and then go to sleep. We're starting early tomorrow, and I expect we'll be training all day."

Riverpaw felt a spark of energy inside her chest. *I can't wait. This is exactly what I needed in a mentor.* Together, Riverpaw and Goldenstar returned to gather all the prey Riverpaw had caught and brought it back into camp.

"My, my," Tawnyfrost mewed, her eyes filling with surprise. "Did you catch all this prey, Riverpaw?" Riverpaw, unable to reply due to a mouthful of prey, just nodded. "That's impressive!"

Riverpaw and Goldenstar dropped the prey on the fresh-kill pile. "Good work today, Riverpaw." Goldenstar rested her tail on Riverpaw's shoulders. "I look forward to training you some more."

Riverpaw felt a warmth inside of her chest at Goldenstar's words. *I'm getting mentored by the Clan leader and she's perfect.* Riverpaw grabbed one of the squirrels she had caught and padded to the apprentice den to eat it.

Outside the den sat Lionpaw, Hazelpaw, Echopaw and Cloverpaw. "I was wondering where you had gone." Lionpaw noted as she approached. "Have you been hunting this whole time."

"Yup." Riverpaw replied shortly before biting into her squirrel, she

hadn't eaten anything since before her ceremony, which didn't even feel like the same day. "Goldenstar had me hunting since we left the camp."

"Sounds intense." Echopaw shuddered. "Aren't you tired?"

Riverpaw nodded. *Echopaw surely wouldn't be able to handle Goldenstar's training.* "I'm tired and sore, but it's worth it. This is the kind of training I want, I want to be worked hard and Goldenstar is going to do that."

"Intense is probably the best word to describe our mother." Hazelpaw snorted. "She's always been hard working. She left the nursery as soon as she could, leaving us under the care of the other queens and Scorchlight."

"I'm not even sure she actually wanted kits." Lionpaw said, Riverpaw couldn't tell if he was angry or not. "She hasn't been the most engaging mother, we rarely even speak to her."

"I mean I don't want kits." Riverpaw chimed in. "I don't blame her."

"But she does have kits." Echopaw pointed out. "And to ignore them, seems kind of cruel."

Riverpaw stared at her sister. *Of course she would want kits.* Riverpaw just shrugged. "I'd say both Lionpaw and Hazelpaw turned out pretty good." She looked at the two siblings. "Mostly." She sneered at Lionpaw.

Lionpaw rolled his eyes. "We both have great mentors, but after a while we stopped caring that Goldenstar didn't really see us as her kits. Scorchlight loves us, and that's something. It's not like Goldenstar has never compliment us, it's just a rarity."

Riverpaw finished off her prey and rose to her paws. "Well, I need to get some sleep. I have even more work to do tomorrow." She bid goodnight to her fellow apprentice and climbed into the den, curling up in her nest. It didn't take long for sleep to find her, and as she drifted off into slumber she dreamt in anticipation of the days to come.

Chapter 10

Goldenstar threw Riverpaw into the ground, she kicked up a flurry of dust and pine needles. Riverpaw winced from the pain, her entire body ached but she still rose to her paws to face her mentor. Riverpaw's legs felt heavy and her lungs burned, but she refused to give up until Goldenstar said so. They had been battle training since just past dawn and it was now nearing sunhigh.

"You were faster that time." Goldenstar mewed. "But I still knocked you down." She waved her tail, her green eyes sparkling. "Are you ready to call it a day?"

"Not yet." Riverpaw bared her teeth. "I wanna go again."

"Very well." Goldenstar dropped into a battle ready stance.

Riverpaw raced forward, bracing herself to fight Goldenstar. She spotted the leader going to swipe at her paws, but Riverpaw put strength into her hind legs and leapt over Goldenstar's reach. She landed squarely on Goldenstar's shoulders and used her strength to knock Goldenstar off balance.

Before the leader hit the ground, Riverpaw jumped off and landed safely on her paws. She twisted on her hind paws and swiped at Goldenstar's muzzle before she had a chance to get back on her paws. Her paw struck Goldenstar and the leader recoiled back, wincing slightly.

Goldenstar jumped to her paws, her pelt becoming a golden blur as Goldenstar took her turn to attack. Riverpaw did her best to duck out of the way but Goldenstar was faster, she slammed her head into Riverpaw's flank, sending her flying backwards.

Her body slammed into a large pine tree, pain spreading across her flank. She fell to the ground and was covered by a shower of pine needles. Riverpaw coughed from he pain, her vision was dazed. After a few moments, Riverpaw struggled to rise to her paws. *That*

was a heavy hit. Riverpaw thought.

"Sorry that was a bit rough." Goldenstar apologized with a dip of her head. "We should call it."

Riverpaw shook her head. "No, I'm okay I just need a moment to rest."

Goldenstar chuckled softly, shaking her head slowly. "We've been going for a long time, and I have a lot I need to do today. Lionpaw and Goldenpaw should be returning from their assessment soon, and if they passed they'll be named warriors, not to mention its the gathering tonight."

"Right!" Riverpaw realized with a shock. "I forgot the gathering was tonight. I've been so busy training it didn't even occur to me."

"Well tonight you will be going. I know you haven't attended a gathering yet. As my apprentice you will."

Riverpaw honestly was surprised to find she didn't feel that excited about the gathering. She had been an apprentice for three moons and hadn't been able to attend a gathering, but ever since becoming Goldenstar's apprentice she had been solely focused on training, even if she had only been training for a few days.

"Let's go back to camp and see if Lionpaw and Hazelpaw are done." Goldenstar mewed and began padding swiftly back to camp. Riverpaw quickly followed suit, keeping pace with her leader. They reached the AshClan camp and sure enough, Lionpaw and Hazelpaw were waiting with Jayclaw and Berryleaf.

"There you are, Goldenstar." Jayclaw raised his head as the two cats stepped into view. "We were waiting for you."

"Sorry." Goldenstar dipped her head. "We got caught up in our training."

"How is that going, by the way?" Jayclaw rested his eyes on Riverpaw, she held her head high.

"It's going well, she's a fierce fighter." Goldenstar purred. "But I'm

more interested in how these two did." Goldenstar looked to her kits.

"They both did incredibly well." Berryleaf praised. "Not a single missed catch from either of them."

"I'm glad to hear it." Goldenstar looked over Lionpaw and Hazelpaw. "You two will make fantastic warriors." She turned and moved towards the center of camp. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!"

The cats of AshClan stopped what they were doing and started gathering, they all seemed to understand what was going on. Riverpaw sat down beside her father, watching Goldenstar gather the Clan. Beside Riverpaw sat Moonpaw, and Echopaw on the other side of her.

Riverpaw had barely spoken to her sisters since becoming Goldenstar's apprentice, but Moonpaw was busy anyway. Riverpaw had no reason to talk to Echopaw, she had other things to do.

"I've gathered the Clan today because two of our apprentices have completed their assessments and are ready to become warriors." Her voice resonated throughout camp, everything about her seemed so powerful. *I'll be just like her.* Riverpaw vowed. "Lionpaw and Goldenpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend the Clan, even at the cost of your lives?"

"I do." Lionpaw spoke boldly, waving his tail.

"I do." Hazelpaw's voice was soft, yet full of confidence. Riverpaw felt sparks in her pelt. *I can't wait for my warrior ceremony.* She thought hopefully.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior names. Lionpaw, you will be known as Lionpelt. AshClan honors your dedication and loyalty." Lionpelt licked Goldenstar's shoulder as she rested her muzzle on his forehead. "Hazelpaw, from this day forward you will be known as Hazelfern. AshClan honors your kind heart and spirit." Hazelfern repeated the same ritual and stepped back. "I welcome you both as full warriors of AshClan!"

"Lionpelt! Hazelfern! Lionpelt! Hazelfern!" The Clan cheered their new warriors and the Clan began dispersing. Riverpaw approached her friends.

"Congratulations you two." Riverpaw mewed. "How does it feel."

"Feels pretty good." Hazelfern purred. "Though it's a shame we'll miss the gathering tonight."

Riverpaw shrugged. "Tonight's my first gathering, which is cool and all, but it's kind of lost its spark."

"Gatherings are very fun the first time." Lionpelt mewed. "Even if you've missed the past two. You should definitely enjoy it."

Riverpaw just shrugged again. She *was* excited, she just didn't see the whole appeal of talking with a bunch of other Clan cats. *My Clan is AshClan, why would I want to talk to anyone else?*

Riverpaw shook the water from her paw, wincing slightly from the cold. *At least that's over with.* AshClan had crossed the river in order to attend the gathering. The full moon was high in the sky and it was time to gather. Riverpaw wanted to talk beside Goldenstar, but she had Eagleclaw and Ivyheart at her side instead, it wouldn't look good if an apprentice came marching in beside her.

Instead, Riverpaw walked beside her sisters and their mentors. She felt out of place, she wanted to be up front by Goldenstar. *Soon I will be.* She thought confidently. Moonpaw and Echopaw were talking about the gathering, Echopaw had attended the previous gathering and Moonpaw had attended both since becoming an apprentice.

They would try and include Riverpaw in their conversation but she would just make a half response and ignore them. She didn't feel like chatting, she just wanted to train. She caught the scent of countless other cats, some she recognized as SunClan and LichenClan, but the other one was unfamiliar to her, she knew it belong to the MoonClan cats.

"Look like we're the last to arrive." Eagleclaw snorted. "Again."

"It doesn't matter when we arrive, Eagleclaw." Goldenstar replied. "AshClan follows their own schedule, not the schedule of the other three Clans."

Eagleclaw just rolled his eyes, but Riverpaw felt inspired by her words. *She's so cool!* Riverpaw thought gleefully as AshClan entered the hollow. The first cats she noticed were the cats sitting atop the four large trees. Riverpaw had been told the names of the all the leaders before they left. There was a large ginger tom, Foxstar of SunClan, an elderly brown she-cat, Birdstar of LichenClan and a fluffy white tom, Owlstar of MoonClan.

"Welcome, Goldenstar." Birdstar called from her tree. "Glad you could finally join us."

"I'm here, aren't I?" Goldenstar replied snidely and moved to her tree, the deputy and the medicine cats sitting at the base of the large oaks. Riverpaw sat down beside Ripplestep and Echopaw sat next to her.

"All the leaders look so cool up there." Echopaw mewed.

"Uh huh." Riverpaw replied without even glancing at her sister.

With Goldenstar in her place, the gathering could finally begin. "I'll go ahead and start." Foxstar began. "We announced a new apprentice earlier this moon, please welcome Stormpaw!" Cheering broke out for the new SunClan apprentice, Riverpaw spotted a silver she-cat sitting in the crowd. "Other than that," Foxstar continued. "We are handling the shift in seasons well, and SunClan is thriving at the moment."

"That's always good to hear." Birdstar purred, taking the lead. "We are happy to announce the birth of two kits born to Willowstrike, Foxkit and Flamekit." More cheering for the kits. *I feel like having kits so soon to leaf-bare isn't a good idea.* Riverpaw thought to herself. "LichenClan is also handling the arrival of the cold season well."

"MoonClan also welcomes new apprentices." Owlstar spoke, Riverpaw noticed he didn't give Birdstar a chance to even sit down. He glanced at the leader with a hostile gaze. *I wonder what's going*

on there? "We welcome Nightpaw, Dovepaw and Badgerpaw."

More cheering arrived, Riverpaw noticed that LichenClan remained fairly quiet. *Something is going on between those two Clans.* Riverpaw thought with interest, she wondered what had happened.

At long last it was Goldenstar's turn, Riverpaw stared up at her leader in admiration. Her golden pelt shimmered silver under the light of the full moon. She spoke boldly and proudly. "Earlier this moon, a fox had wandered into our territory. We drove it off, but we suffered the loss of Silverstripe." There was a moment of silence for Riverpaw's former mentor. "However, AshClan remains strong even without one of our loyal warriors. Today, two apprentices were named warriors. Please welcome Lionpelt and Hazelfern."

The Clans cheered for the new warriors, Riverpaw joined in as well. AshClan would probably be announcing warriors for the next several moons, Cloverpaw and Mudpaw were not far off from earning their warrior names. *And soon it will be my turn.* Riverpaw flexed her claws, tearing softly at the grass beneath her paws.

"It's far to cold to socialize tonight, sadly." Foxstar mewed. "Have safe travels home everyone, and may StarClan light your paths." The SunClan leader jumped down and began guiding his Clan home. Riverpaw stood up, glad to finally be heading home and getting out of the cold.

I want to be a warrior so badly. She thought. *I'll do anything I can to get it, and I can't be wasting my time on gatherings.* She looked at Goldenstar who was having a quick conversation with Owlstar before leaving. *I'll be leader someday, and until then I will work hard to make Goldenstar proud.*

Chapter 11

Echopaw shivered in her nest, slowly lifting her head and blinking away sleep. She lifted her head slowly and let out a heavy yawn. As she mind unclogged from sleep she took a look around the apprentice den. It was mostly empty except her, Hollypaw and Mousepaw. Riverpaw was always up at dawn, and earlier that moon, Mudthorn, Cloverstrike, Rainsong and Windheart had all been named warriors.

The apprentice den was getting smaller and more spacious, but Echopaw knew that if they didn't expand the warrior's den soon, any new warriors would be remaining in the apprentice den. Her warrior ceremony wouldn't be for several more moons, she figured so she didn't have to worry about that just yet.

Echopaw rose to her paws and stretched out her limbs. She peered out the den entrance and realized that small flakes of snow were slowly falling from the sky. *It's really leaf-bare now.* Echopaw thought with a flick of her tail. She stepped into the frigid air outside and suppressed another shiver. It had snowed a couple times before now, but she could see the snow starting to form a layer on the ground.

It's here to stay this time. Echopaw thought. She brushed off the thoughts of snow and began scanning camp for her mentor. She finally spotted him staying warm with Berryleaf besides the warrior's den. Echopaw braved the cold and approached her mentor. Ripplestep looked up and greeted his apprentice with a nod. "Good morning, Echopaw." He dipped his head. "Ready to start training?"

"I am." Echopaw gave a small nod.

"I'll see you later." Ripplestep purred sweetly, touching his muzzle to Berryleaf's cheek. He rose to his paws and the two of them ventured out into camp.

"What are we doing today?" Echopaw questioned, looking around AshClan territory which was starting to turn white.

"Now that the snow is actually here," Ripplestep began. "I'm going to test your leaf-bare hunting skills."

"Okay." Echopaw mewed boldly. She had practiced several times in preparation for leaf-bare, but now the snow was here and she would have to hone in on her skills in order to feed her Clan. "Where should I start?"

"Let's start heading towards the SunClan border, and you can catch whatever you can find along the way." Ripplestep suggested and the two of them began padding away from the camp.

Echopaw lifted her muzzle into the air and breathed in. It was hard to scent anything over the frost. The cold air just bit at her nose, it was even difficult to catch the scent of the pine trees around them. She focused harder and after a short time walking, she finally caught the scent of squirrel.

She started tracking and broke away from Ripplestep. He followed silently behind her, letting her hunt. Echopaw tracks for a few foxlengths until she spotted the creature. It's dark ginger fur was like a splash of blood against the snow. She was grateful that she didn't have a black pelt like Ripplestep.

She dropped into the hunters crouch and began stalking her prey. She kept her breaths silent, and walked with precision. As she prepared to make her leap, one final step landed on a brittle twig, snapping it in two. The squirrel's head snapped up and it was now aware of the danger it was in.

Echopaw made an attempt to race after the squirrel as it raced away, but the squirrel was too fast. It sprinted up tree and vanished into the pine needles. Echopaw let out a hiss of frustration.

"That's unfortunate." Ripplestep spoke up, padding up behind her. Echopaw flattened her ears. *I swear I miss more prey than any other apprentice. Riverpaw wouldn't have missed that catch.* She thought bitterly. "Don't beat yourself up over it." Ripplestep rested his tail on

her shoulders. "It's your first time hunting in snow, even I didn't see that twig." Echopaw cast a grateful glance up at her mentor, but she was still annoyed with herself for missing her catch. "Let's keep going."

Echopaw continued tracking prey through the forest, she picked out the scent of another squirrel and began tracking. *I won't let this one go.* Echopaw promised herself and dropped into a crouch. She spotted the small animal at the base of pine tree, sniffing around the frosted ground. *I'll have to be quick.*

Echopaw scanned the ground for any stray twigs and spotted two of them on her path. She made a mental note so she could avoid them. She crept forward silently, ready to make her attack. Making sure to not make any mistakes, Echopaw pounced. She fell slightly short of her prey, but made a quick recovery and sank her claws into the squirrel's back as it ran up the tree, pulling it back down to the ground. She killed it with a quick bite.

"Good work." Ripplestep purred. "That was a good recovery."
"I still messed up though." Echopaw thought, flicking her tail annoyance. "It almost got away."

"That's okay, Echopaw." Ripplestep assured her. "Sometimes we make mistakes, what matters is that you were able to recover and catch the squirrel. During leaf-bare, any prey is good prey."

"I suppose." Echopaw didn't feel convinced, but regardless they continued. They grew closer to the SunClan border and Echopaw wasn't finding anymore prey. A new scent caught her nose, but it wasn't prey, it was AshClan. A few moments later, the morning patrol stepped into view. It was lead by Goldenstar with Riverpaw at her side, it also featured Jayclaw, Owlstorm, Dustclaw, Graypaw and Heatherstorm.

"Greetings you two." Goldenstar greeted, Echopaw noticed just how close Riverpaw was to the leader. *She acts like she's deputy.* Echopaw thought with annoyance. "Hunting, I presume?"

Ripplestep nodded. "She's practicing her snow hunting."

"How's that going?" Jayclaw questioned, resting his eyes sternly on Echopaw who tensed under her father's intense gaze.

"Pretty well so far. She managed to track down two squirrels and caught one of them." Echopaw winced slightly. *Did he have to mention that I missed one?*

"Only one of them?" Jayclaw narrowed his eyes. "Prey is incredibly important during these times, we can't afford to be missing prey." Echopaw dropped her head in shame.

"It was an honest mistake, really." Ripplestep stood up for Echopaw, but Jayclaw was clearly unconvinced.

"She needs more practice. She doesn't put in as much effort as her sister and it shows."

Jayclaw's words were like claws, tearing into her heart. Her pelt burned with fierce embarrassment as her father insulted her in front of the entire patrol. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Riverpaw looking smug. Echopaw flattened her ears, she didn't dare speak. "Well--" Ripplestep mewed awkwardly. "We should continue, no time to waste."

Ripplestep hurried Echopaw forward and she drug her paws through the snow, feeling her father glare ripping into her. Once the patrol was out of earshot, Ripplestop slumped his shoulders. "Sorry, Echopaw. I probably shouldn't have brought that up."

"It's fine." Echopaw muttered, nudging a pile of needles. "I know I'll never be as good as Riverpaw, our father knows it too."

Ripplestep sat down beside Echopaw. "I honestly couldn't believe he said such things about, fathers are supposed to encourage their daughters, not drag them down. I would never compare Hollypaw to Spiderpaw." He shook his head. "Echopaw, you shouldn't want to be like Riverpaw. She may be skilled but she's skilled and lacks respect and patience. I know what its like to train under Goldenstar, she worked me half to death, and yeah I have the skills of a good warrior, but it's not a good way to train."

Echopaw just stared at her paws. "Jayclaw thinks it's the proper way to train, he's always so proud of Riverpaw, and even Moonpaw. He's never been proud of me. Maybe I don't want to be leader, or a great medicine cat. I just want to be a good warrior, is that so bad?" She looked up hopefully at Ripplestep.

"Of course not, Echopaw." Ripplestep nudged him. "Chances are, most of us won't ever become leaders in our lifetimes. The best we can do is serve our Clan, we feed them, fight for them and provide for our friends and family. That's what good warriors do, and if that's all you want to be that's okay. I want to be a good mentor to you, I want to not only train you the skills to provide for your Clan, but the attitude to be compassionate and respectful towards your Clanmates."

"You're a great mentor, Ripplestep." Echopaw purred. She was glad she had such a kind mentor, he was patient and taught her well.

"If you'd like, we can have a few more training sessions so you can hone in on your skills a little more. We won't train like Riverpaw and Goldenstar, but we can always work on some specific skills."

"I'd like that." Echopaw rose to her paws.

"I'll see what I can do." Ripplestep promised. "Now let's continue hunting." Echopaw happily agreed. She was so lucky to have Ripplestep as a mentor, part of her wished that Echopaw had been his daughter instead of Jayclaw's. *He's much better to me than Jayclaw ever has been, and I won't listen to him anymore.*

Chapter 12

Snow fell steadily from the pale, clouded sky. Moonpaw walked swiftly through the snow, a bundle of herbs secured in her jaws. She was nearing AshClan camp and was eager to get out of the bitter cold. They were a almost a moon into leaf-bare and it had left the forest in a thick layer of snow. Moonpaw quickly realized how much she hated snow, and she had a bad feeling leaf-bare was only going to get worse.

The first moments of leaf-bare had been rather kind to AshClan, but Eagleclaw had told her to never let her guard down during this season as the deadly sickness greencough could set in at any moment. Moonpaw feared the worst when it came to greencough, they had a small supply of catmint, it would be enough to treat some Clan mates, but if the sickness spread too fast, they wouldn't be able to control it.

Eagleclaw had ordered her to gather as much tansy and chickweed as she could carry. Her jaws were currently full of both herbs. Both were used to treat greencough, and would hopefully keep the sickness as bay in order to prevent them from using all their catmint.

Moonpaw finally reached the AshClan camp where she encountered Echopaw. Her sister looked at her curiously. "You look you're about to break your jaw, want some help?" Moonpaw nodded awkwardly and gently set down some of the herbs which her sister took from her. Together, Moonpaw and Echopaw padded across their snowy camp towards the medicine cat den.

Once inside the medicine cat den, Moonpaw set down the herbs alongside her sister. "Thank you." Moonpaw bowed her head once she could speak. "I gathered a little more than I can handle."

"What are they?" Echopaw questioned, giving the herbs a sniff. Moonpaw began putting the herbs in their store, making sure they were nice and neat.

"The yellow flower is tansy and the other one is chickweed. Both help treat greencough." Moonpaw explained.

"Do we not have any catmint?" Echopaw asked, her eyes filling with concern.

"We do," Moonpaw assured her. "Just not a lot. Eagleclaw wants to save it for a dire situation. Which hopefully with the help of these two herbs won't happen." Before Echopaw could respond, Moonpaw the heavy pawsteps of Eagleclaw. He rested his eyes curiously on Echopaw. "She helped me carry the herbs back." Moonpaw explained.

"How many did you get?" Eagelclaw questioned, walking past Echopaw and sticking his muzzle in the herb store.

"Quite a bit, there's even a small amount left. Only a small amount of the tansy had been killed by the frost." Moonpaw explained.

"That's good." Eagleclaw turned around looking at Echopaw. "You can leave now." His voice was almost a growl, Echopaw flattened her ears.

"Don't mind him." Moonpaw assured her sister. "But we do have a lot of work to do, I'll talk to you later Echopaw." She touched her muzzle to Echopaw's cheek.

"Alright, good luck." Echopaw bowed her head and turned out of the medicine cat.

"What else do we have to do?" Moonpaw questioned.

"We need to move our nests." Eagleclaw said, eyeing their nests. "Yours will be closer to mine just so we have plenty of room to have nests at a distance in case we get a lot of sick cats."

"Is greencough really as bad as you're making it out to be?" Moonpaw asked, starting to gather moss to move her nest.

"It can be." Eagleclaw replied stoically. "My very first leaf-bare was horrifying. I was three moons old, still in the nursery. It started with Doefern, she was Duskwhisker's sister. She got sick, but didn't

feel like she was ill enough to tell anyone. Then she started expecting kits and moved into the nursery.

"She got her mate, Waspflame sick. Then she got every resident in the nursery sick, including me, my brother and my parents. We were lucky, others were not. There was a queen named Mossystream who had three kits. She and all three of her kits died. Then Doefern died, followed by Waspflame and their two kits. The only kits who survived were me and Sharptongue. Our mother, Roseclaw almost died. It took her moons to recover, even now she struggles to breathe at times."

Moonpaw stared at her mentor in horror. "I can't believe that happened. That's so horrible."

Eagleclaw nodded. "That was Featherstorm's greatest regret as a medicine cat. She wished she would've noticed Doefern's sickness sooner, maybe she could've saved more. She told me it was the hardest days of her life. She watched kits die around her, and she thought me and my brother would join them but she managed to save us. That's the reason why I wanted to become a medicine cat. She stopped eating, stopped sleeping and I wanted to help her. She taught me to always take greencough seriously and not let any sickness slip by."

Moonpaw understood Eagleclaw's fears a whole lot more now, she couldn't imagine that kind of suffering. *Featherstorm must have hurt so much.* "Thank you for telling me that, even if it was such a dark story."

Eagleclaw gave a small nod. "It's an important story, it shows how important it is to take this season seriously."

"Excuse me?" A timid voice spoke up from outside the medicine cat den. Moonpaw turned around and saw Cloverstrike standing in the snow.

"Is something wrong, Cloverstrike?" Moonpaw questioned.

"Yeah," Cloverstrike cleared her throat. "My mother has been coughing all day. She claims its just the weather, but I just want to

be sure."

Moonpaw tensed up, and she noticed her mentor doing the same. "Please tell Tawnyfrost to come to us, but please keep your distance."

"Okay," Cloverstrike bowed her head. "What if she doesn't want to come."

"Make her." Eagleclaw growled. Cloverstrike quickly bounded away from the medicine cat. "When Tawnyfrost gets here we need to treat her cough, even if its not greencough we can't risk anything."

"I understand." Moonpaw nodded. A few moments later, Tawnyfrost appeared at the front of the medicine cat den, looking rather annoyed.

"I told Cloverstrike I was fine, but does she listen?" Moonpaw could hear how dry the queen's voice was.

"Come in, Tawnyfrost." Eagleclaw lashed his tail. Tawnyfrost reluctantly listened to the medicine cat and sat down in front him. Eagleclaw began circling around Tawnyfrost, sniffing her pelt and resting his ear against his chest. "Take a deep breath." She took a deep breath and Eagleclaw motioned for Moonpaw to come over. Moonpaw padded over to her. "Do what i just did, and Tawnyfrost take another deep breath."

Moonpaw placed her ear against Tawnyfrost's chest and she took another deep breath. Her breath sounded rough, rattling in her chest. Moonpaw lifted her head and looked at Eagleclaw. "That sounds really bad."

"Because it is." Eagleclaw looked sternly at Tawnyfrost. "You're sick, Tawnyfrost."

"It's just a cough." Tawnyfrost argued.

"Maybe it is," Eagleclaw moved to the herb store. "But it could easily become something more. I know you remember Doefern."

Tawnyfrost flattened her ears. "Of course I do, that whole situation

almost killed my father. I was just an apprentice."

"We don't want that happening again." Eagleclaw explained. "All I ask of you is for you to take some chickweed and stay in here for a few nights so we can get rid of the sickness without it spreading."

Tawnyfrost sighed. "Alright, Eagleclaw. I'll take the herbs."

"Thank you." Eagleclaw dipped his head and retrieved the chickweed. As Tawnyfrost ate the herb, Moonpaw heard coughing from outside the camp. "Go see who that was." Eagleclaw instructed.

Moonpaw poked her head outside to see one of the newest warriors, Spiderheart, coughing. Moonpaw flattened her ears. "It's Spiderheart." She reported. Spiderheart and his siblings, now named Hollytail and Mousetail, had been made warriors at the end of the last moon.

Eagleclaw sighed. "Get ready, Moonpaw, we have a long leaf-bare ahead of us."

Chapter 13

"*Take a deep breath, Lilypaw.*" Moonpaw instructed the apprentice, her ear resting against her chest. Lilypaw took a deep breath as instructed, but was interrupted by a bought of coughing. Moonpaw sighed. "You have whitecough."

"What's gonna happen to me?" She asked with concern deep in her mew.

"You just need to take some herbs and rest." Moonpaw explained. "I'll get you some chickweed." She looked over to her mentor who was making yet another nest. Exhaustion wore on Moonpaw's shoulders as she looked at the state of their den. "We need another nest Eagleclaw." She told her mentor.

Eagleclaw sighed heavily. "Alright." He replied, his voice dry. It had been a little over a moon since Tawnyfrost came down with sickness and it had spread like wildfire, just as Eagleclaw feared. Spiderheart had moved in not long after Tawnyfrost and it only got worse from there.

Rainsong, followed by Cinderflower, Owlstorm, and now Lilypaw. Even Goldenstar had begun coughing, but she had been confined to her own den. Tawnyfrost was the very worst, with full blown greencough. The once regal and powerful she-cat now had dull fur and bleak eyes.

Eagleclaw had been giving her small amounts of catmint with each passing day, but she wasn't getting any better. Both medicine cats feared the worst. The sickness had thankfully stayed away from the nursery and elder's den, mostly due to the rules that Goldenstar had put into place before retiring to her own den.

No cat was allowed in either of the dens unless it was Moonpaw or Eagleclaw. The biggest scare was not long after the sickness started spreading, Hollytail moved into the nursery expecting Windheart's kits. Hollytail was incredibly young, but Moonpaw had heard

rumors that the two of them had been in love since they were apprentices. Moonpaw just hoped the sickness would stay away from not only her kits, but Duskwhisker and Featherkit was well.

Moonpaw helped Lilypaw into her temporary nest and stopped for just a moment to take a breath, she had barely slept through all of her coughing Clanmates. She sat down and lapped up some water, but her break was short lived.

"Moonpaw!" She heard her sister crying through the silence. Moonpaw jumped in alarm and rose to her paws, running to where Riverpaw stood in the entrance.

"Riverpaw, what's wrong?" Moonpaw questioned in a panic, Riverpaw had grabbed the attention of Eagleclaw as well.

"I went to Goldenstar's den to ask what she wanted me to practice, but she didn't respond. I got nervous so I went inside,"

"I told everyone to *stay out* of Goldenstar's den." Eagleclaw hissed at Riverpaw.

"I know, but she only sleeps at night and I was really worried but she's not waking up!"

"Moonpaw go to the Goldenstar, I'll meet you there." Moonpaw nodded and ran with Riverpaw towards the leader's den. *Is Goldenstar on her last life? She can't be!* Moonpaw skidded to a stop in front of the leader's den.

"Stay out here." She commanded her sister before running into the dimly lit den. Moonpaw saw her leader lying lifeless in her den. She gave her golden pelt a sniff, it reeked of foul sickness.

"Oh, StarClan no..." Moonpaw breathed out.

"Is she okay?" Riverpaw spoke, stepping inside.

"Get *out*, Riverpaw." Eagelclaw hissed as he approached. He dropped catmint by Goldenstar's head, sniffing her muzzle. He sighed. "We're too late, she's losing a life."

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Moonpaw pleaded.

Eagleclaw shook his head. "She's dying, but she is a leader. She's not out of lives yet." Moonpaw stared in horror, hating the feeling of helplessness. After several long moments, Goldenstar's lifeless body stirred.

Her amber eyes slowly opened and faced the medicine cats. "Welcome back." Eagleclaw mewed. He nudged the catmint towards her. "Take this."

"No." Goldenstar cleared her throat.

"*No?"* Eagleclaw stared in shock. "Are you insane?"

"Save it for Tawnyfrost and any others that get sicker." Goldenstar looked to be regaining her strength.

"You need it, Goldenstar."

"Others need it more." Goldenstar's tone held firm. "I have lives to lose, they don't. The sickness already killed me, it will leave my system if I stay away from the others."

"You only have *two* lives left, Goldenstar!" Eagleclaw exclaimed, Moonpaw withheld a gasp. *She only has two lives left?*

"I am very aware of this, Eagleclaw." Goldenstar scolded. "I'd rather give both of those lives before I let a young cat like Lilypaw perish. That's why I have these lives."

Eagleclaw sighed in defeat. "Fine, Goldenstar. Have it your way." He picked up the catmint and left, grunting under his breath.

"Thank you for your hard work, Moonpaw." Goldenstar mewed.

"You're really not going to take any herbs?"

"I'll take chickweed and tansy, I won't take catmint. It's far too precious. Even if I was on my last life, I wouldn't take it."

Moonpaw looked sadly at Goldenstar. "Why not?"

"Because, I've lived through seven lives already and I know the Clan would be in safe paws with Ivyheart. If I was the only sick cat, then maybe, but I want my Clanmates safe and healthy. That's what it means to be leader."

Moonpaw felt partially inspired by her words. *Goldenstar is reckless at times, but she is a true leader.* "Please, let us know if you need anything. I'll bring you some chickweed and prey soon."

"Thank you, Moonpaw."

Moonpaw turned away from the leader. *I suppose being leader is a difficult task, and requires a lot of sacrifice.* Moonpaw stepped out of the den where she was met with a panicked Riverpaw.

"Goldenstar only has *two* lives left?" Riverpaw demanded. "Did you know this?"

"I didn't until now." Moonpaw assured her. "It's nothing to worry about, Riverpaw. She has many lives to keep her strong, these last two lives could last a very long time. I know you care about her, but she is a leader for a reason."

"I know." Riverpaw sighed. "Thank you for taking care of her." Riverpaw thanked Moonpaw.

"It's what I do."

"Eagleclaw!" A terrified mew split the air, Eagleclaw who was almost at the medicine cat den stopped. Moonpaw looked towards the terrified mew, it belonged to Duskwhisker who was standing in the nursery looking horrified. "Hollytail is bleeding!"

"I gotta go." Moonpaw told Riverpaw and raced to her mentor, following him into the nursery. Hollytail was on her side, blood staining her nest. Eagleclaw rested a paw on her belly and sighed.

"She's kitting."

"But she's only been expecting for a moon!" Moonpaw cried.

"Sometimes kits come early, we need to help her and fast."

"What's going on?" Moonpaw heard the voice of Windheart behind them.

"Your mate is kitting early." Eagleclaw replied and turned out of the nursery. "I need you to stay out."

"But she's a moon early!" Windheart cried. "I need to be in there with her! I'm not sick."

"You could be carrying the sickness with you." Eagleclaw faced the tom. "If you go in there and get not only your mate and new born kits sick, but Featherkit and Duskwhisker sick. Stay. Outside. I'll be right back, Moonpaw." Eagleclaw shoved past Windheart towards the medicine cat.

"Moonpaw?" Windheart had pure fear in his eyes.

Moonpaw shook his head. "I'm sorry, Windheart but Eagleclaw is right. We can't risk these kits getting sick."

Windheart sighed and sat down outside the nursery, watching Hollytail from the outside. "I'm right here, Hollytail!" He called. "You can do this, my love. I know you can."

Eagleclaw returned shortly after with a bundle of herbs and sat them down next to Moonpaw. "Alright, Moonpaw." He mewed. "This is a race against time, we need to get these kits out safely and stop Hollytail's bleeding. It will be hard, but not impossible." He nudged a branch towards Hollytail. "You'll want this."

"Are my kits going to be okay?" Hollytail panted, clearly in a lot of pain.

"Time will tell." Eagleclaw mewed, his voice was stern, and made Hollytail visibly nervous.

"Don't worry, Hollytail." Moonpaw mewed, keeping her voice soft. "We'll do everything we can to get these kits here safe and sound. I guess they just couldn't wait to meet you."

Hollytail let out a pained chuckle and took the branch in her teeth. It wasn't long before a spasm gripped the queen's body and she let

out a shrill cry of pain, biting down on the stick. "The first one is coming." Eagleclaw announced. Moonpaw had helped deliver Featherkit but he had come out so easily and on time.

"Keep going, Hollytail." Moonpaw urged the queen. She let out another cry of agony, the stick splintering between the teeth.

A tiny bundle fell into the nest behind Hollytail. "Duskwhisker, come get this kit." The queen obeyed, making sure Featherkit stayed away from the action. She picked up the impossibly small bundle of wet fur and began running her tongue up its spine.

"Eagleclaw!" A new panicked mew sounded from outside.

"Oh for StarClan's sake what *now?"* His head whipped around as Rainsong stood in the entrance, her legs shaking. "Get back in the medicine cat den!" He hissed.

"Something is wrong with Tawnyfrost!" She wailed.

Eagleclaw groaned loudly and hesitated for a moment before turning around. "Moonpaw, take care of Hollytail. I'm going to go see Tawnyfrost."

"But--"

"You can do it, Moonpaw." Eagleclaw assured her. "Get the next kit delivered, give it to Duskwhisker and give Hollytail the raspberry leaves. I'll be right back." He ran out of the den and left Moonpaw, horrified and alone. She took a deep breath. *I can do this.*

"Alright, Hollytail, let's get this other kit." She looked at Duskwhisker, the kit she had been giving was letting out tiny, pitiful squeaks." Moonpaw placed her paw on Hollytail's belly, feeling a small ripple. "It's almost time, a little longer."

Hollytail screeched out in pain, her claws shredding her nest. Moonpaw forced herself to stay calm. "Just a little more." She could see the beginnings of the kit starting to come out.

"You can do it, Hollytail!" Windheart cheered from outside.

Another spasm and a cry of pain, and the kit was getting closer. "One more!" Moonpaw urged.

"I can't!" Hollytail wailed. "It hurts so much!"

"You can do it!" Windheart cheered again. "Do it for our kits!"

Hollytail took a shaky breath and pushed once again, as a little bundle of brown fur fell into the nest. Duskwhisker rushed over and nipped the sack open, licking its fur. *Now to stop the bleeding.* There was a lot of blood coating the nest and Hollytail's pelt.

"Take these." Moonpaw passed the raspberry leaves to the new mother who ate them quickly. Keeping focused, Moonpaw worked on stopping the bleeding. It took longer than it did with Duskwhisker, but the bleeding slowed a stop. Moonpaw breathed a sigh of relief. "You did it, Hollytail." Both kits were placed at the queens belly and though small, began fighting for milk.

Moonpaw looked at the tiny kits, both she-cats. The first born was silver with white markings while the other was mottled brown. "They're so cute." Moonpaw purred loudly. "They're so tiny."

Hollytail was visibly exhausted, but when she looked at our kits her eyes lit up like Silverpelt. "Thank you so much, Moonpaw. These little kits were worth every moment of pain."

"Are the kits okay?" Windheart questioned in a panic. Moonpaw stepped away from the queen to talk to the father.

"They're doing good." Moonpaw replied. "They're already eating. They'll be small, but they should be fine as long as they don't get sick."

"What do they look like?" Windheart peeked over, desperate to see.

"They're both she-cats, one is silver and white and the other is mottled brown." Moonpaw explained.

"They sound perfect." Windheart breathed out in relief. "I love you, Hollytail." Windheart spoke into the nursery. "I'm so proud of you, and soon enough I'll meet our daughters."

"We'll be waiting for you." Hollytail replied, purring softly.

"You should go check on Eagleclaw, Moonpaw." Duskwhisker reminded her.

"Right." Moonpaw shook her head, she had almost forgotten. *I hope everything's fine.* "I'll be back with borage later." Moonpaw quickly trotted away from the nursery, she half-expected to find Eagleclaw helping Tawnyfrost, but the atmosphere inside the medicine cat den was somber. *No.*

Eagleclaw sat in front of Tawnyfrost's nest, his back to Moonpaw. "Eagleclaw?" She spoke in fear. Eagleclaw slumped his shoulders. "Is she..?"

"She's in StarClan now." Eagleclaw looked over his shoulder. "She was on her last breaths when I got here, there was nothing we could've done." He looked at his paws, Moonpaw had never seen him look so sad. "How are the kits? And Hollytail?"

"They're good." Moonpaw replied. "Already hungry."

"Good." Eagleclaw sighed. "Tawnyfrost would be happy to hear that." While the other sick cats mourned the loss, Eagleclaw pulled Moonpaw aside. "I came to help Tawnyfrost because I knew it would be too late, StarClan has been pulling at her for a while now. I wanted you to experience life, not death. Not yet, anyway."

"I'm sorry she had to die." Moonpaw dropped her head.

"I need you to know we can't blame ourselves for this, Tawnyfrost's death will shake the Clan, but the kits will give them hope. Know that, Moonpaw. AshClan is strong, we will recover, we always do."

Chapter 14

Riverpaw quickly padded up to Goldenstar's den, she could see her leader eating a small mouse in the dimly lit den. "Good morning, Goldenstar!" She called to her mentor.

Goldenstar looked up from her prey and met her apprentice's gaze. "Good morning, Riverpaw."

"How are you feeling?" Riverpaw questioned.

"Better every day." Goldenstar purred. "Ready for your assignment today?"

"Of course!" When Goldenstar got sick, instead of giving Riverpaw a temporary mentor, she would just go to Goldenstar's den each day and be given something to do. Then Riverpaw would come back and tell Goldenstar everything she did. Sometimes Riverpaw would join battle training with either her sister or Graypaw, and she usually did so much better than either of them.

When Riverpaw had come across Goldenstar dying, she had been incredibly shaken. She was taken back to Silverstripe's death. She also learned that Goldenstar only had two lives which had scared her. *I never want to lose Goldenstar, she's the greatest mentor in the whole forest!*

Riverpaw had done her best to ignore these fears, she knew that Goldenstar was a strong leader and those two lives would last a long time. *She's not going anywhere any time soon.* Riverpaw always had to remind herself.

"Today I want you to go hunting by the SunClan border, we haven't hunted there much so try and get as much prey as you can. Our fresh-kill pile is running low." Goldenstar explained. "Also, take Echopaw and Graypaw with you."

Riverpaw flattened her ears. "Why? Can't I hunt by myself?"

Goldenstar chuckled. "I want you to take charge in a hunting party, lead Echopaw and Graypaw and give them some orders. Don't boss them around, but show them some tips. You can tell both Dustclaw and Ripplestep that I said I want you three to go hunting. Just stay out of trouble."

"Understood." Riverpaw liked the idea of being in charge of her sister, plus it would give her practice at being a leader! She sought out both apprentices and found Graypaw first. "Goldenstar wants me to lead a hunting party with you and Echopaw." She explained.

"You leading us?" Graypaw narrowed his eyes. "I don't know if I like the sound of that."

Riverpaw rolled her eyes. "I won't be bossy, I promise." She assured him.

"I guess." Graypaw stood up. "Let's go get Echopaw." They found Echopaw by the apprentice den.

"Hey, Echopaw!" Riverpaw called, trotting up to her. "Goldenstar wants me to lead a hunting party with you and Graypaw. We're going to the SunClan border."

Echopaw seemed just as unsure as Graypaw did. "Really?"

Riverpaw sighed. "You can check with Goldenstar if you want, and I won't be bossy." Riverpaw urged. "We're wasting time."

"Fine, fine." Echopaw rose to her paws. "Let me just make sure with Ripplestep..."

"Whatever." Riverpaw groaned. After double checking with both their mentors and Goldenstar once more, the three apprentices ventured out into the snowy forest.

"How's Lilypaw doing?" Echopaw checked with Graypaw.

"Better." Graypaw replied. "She's all but got rid of her cough. She should be out of the medicine cat den soon."

"Rainsong got released today right?"

"Yeah, and Spiderheart should be next. That just leaves Lilyaw and Owlstorm."

"It's such a shame about Tawnyfrost." Echopaw mewed sadly. "But I've heard Petalkit and Leafkit are super cute. I can't wait to see them."

She's so worried about such trivial things. Riverpaw thought silently. *That's what makes us different.*

"How is Moonpaw doing?" Graypaw checked.

"She was really stressed out, but she's relieved that the sickness seems to be going away."

"Leaf-bare isn't over yet." Graypaw added.

"I know, but we haven't had any new cases of illness since Lilypaw. Moonpaw thinks we may have got rid of it thanks to Eagleclaw's planning."

Riverpaw couldn't listen to their dull conversation anymore, she kept leading them towards the border. She had been saddened by the loss of Tawnyfrost, and new kits were always good but there was more important things to worry about during this time.

Prey was running slow, and every warrior had to focus on hunting as much as possible to keep the Clan healthy and fed. Riverpaw knew what it really meant to serve her Clan, and she wasn't wasting her time with fawning over newborn kits. They weren't even doing anything, they just slept.

"We're nearing the border." Riverpaw announced as she caught the scent of SunClan. "We need to start hunting now. Graypaw, start tracking some prey, Echopaw it will be up to you to catch it." Riverpaw knew Echopaw hated taking orders from her, but it made the whole experience much more enjoyable.

Graypaw began sniffing along the ground, searching for prey. Riverpaw noticed him catching a trail and following it. Echopaw and Riverpaw silently followed suit. Graypaw was fairly young, but he had decent tracking skills.

They spotted a small mouse, digging at the frozen ground. Riverpaw watched as Echopaw dropped into the hunters crouch and began stalking her prey. *She's gotten better.* Riverpaw couldn't help but note. *But we'll see how she catches it.*

Riverpaw watched her sister closely, Echopaw crept forward silently and when she was close enough, gave a powerful leap. Her paws landed perfectly on top of the mouse, it didn't even really have a chance to realize what was going on, Echopaw killed it with a swift bite. *Wow.* Riverpaw stared in awe. *She's really improved.* Riverpaw felt slightly awkward. *Guess I haven't really been paying attention.*

"Good job, Echopaw." Riverpaw praised, hoping she sound genuine.

Echopaw looked at her in surprise. "Uh, thank you." Her eyes sparkled. *Maybe there's hope for a friendship between us afterall.*

"Let's keep going." Riverpaw took charged and led them closer to the border. They walked for a long while, not catching any prey scents.

"Riverpaw, stop!" Echopaw suddenly called and Riverpaw froze in her tracks.

"What?" Riverpaw snapped, wondering why Echopaw suddenly stopped her.

"You crossed the SunClan border." Echopaw explained in a rush.

Riverpaw had been so focused on checking for prey that she didn't notice the border. Riverpaw quickly stepped back into AshClan territory, her pelt burning. *Stupid move.* "I-I knew that."

Echopaw and Graypaw rolled their eyes. "Sure you did, Riverpaw." Graypaw twitched his tail. "You looked so scared when you realized you were on the other side."

"I wasn't scared!" Riverpaw argued. "I'm not scared of anything."

"Oh yeah?" Graypaw stepped forward, puffing out of his chest. "Prove it."

"I'll do anything," Riverpaw boasted.

Graypaw sneered. "Cross the border and stand there."

Riverpaw tensed and looked over her shoulder at the border. "But that breaks the warrior code..."

"So?" Graypaw shrugged. "If you're brave you'll do it."

"Don't listen to him, Riverpaw." Echopaw stepped in. "You have nothing to prove."

"I thought you wanted to be leader, Riverpaw." Graypaw chuckled. "You think Goldenstar is scared of a border?"

Riverpaw grit her teeth. *A leader isn't scared of anything.* Riverpaw turned to face the border. "Don't do it, Riverpaw!" Echopaw pleaded but Riverpaw ignored her sister. She stepped across the border and took a breath, then crossed the whole thing. She stood boldly in SunClan territory and faced the other two.

"Happy now?" Riverpaw hissed at Graypaw.

"Great, you prove it now *get back here!*" Echopaw urged. "You're gonna get caught."

Riverpaw rolled her eyes. "It's not a big deal, Echopaw, there's no one else here."

At her words, Riverpaw heard movement behind her. Riverpaw jumped and spun around, not seeing anything, her heart began pounding in her chest. "Riverpaw!" Echopaw cried. "Get back over here!"

"R-right," Before Riverpaw could turn around a cat exploded out of the snowy undergrowth. A large brown tom landed on top of Riverpaw and pinned her on her back, he rested his large paw on her neck, his claws resting against her flesh. She met his dark amber eyes, and the large scar down his face gave away who he was. *Falconclaw.*

Falconclaw was a SunClan warrior known for his violence and

strength. Behind Riverpaw, Graypaw and Echopaw cried out in a alarm. "Look what I found." Falconclaw sneered, his teeth dangerously close to Riverpaw's face. "A little, lost AshClan apprentice on my territory." He growled.

"I-I'm not little!" Riverpaw cried out, trying to be brave. She flexed her claws. *I might have to fight.*

"Don't fight, Riverpaw!" Echopaw cried out. "You broke the warrior code, you're on *his* territory." Riverpaw grit her teeth.

"Smart apprentice." Falconclaw chuckled. "She's right, you know." Falconclaw's amber eyes burned deeply in Riverpaw's blue eyes. "You broke the warrior code." He leaned in close, his foul breath clouding Riverpaw's face. "That means I could kill you." His claws flexed, pressing into Riverpaw's neck.

He's going to kill me. Riverpaw started to panic. *I made a stupid mistake!*

"Please," Echopaw pleaded. "Please don't hurt her, she was just being stupid." Riverpaw winced. "Please just let her go."

"Now why would I do that?" Falconclaw lifted his head to look at Echopaw. "She broke the rules, she needs to be punished."

"She's just an apprentice, please, Falconclaw." Echopaw's voice was pure panic.

Falconclaw chuckled and looked back down at Riverpaw who was trembling violently. "Scared little apprentice?" He pressed down slightly harder on her neck, she was now struggling to breathe. "You should be. There are dangerous cats around here, cats like *me.*" She bared his razor sharp teeth. "As much as I would love to deliver a dead apprentice to Goldenstar, I think I'll leave you be for now. Just remember this, *Riverpaw.*" He spat her name like venom and lowered his voice to a whisper. "If I ever catch you on my territory again, I *will* kill you, and I'll do it happily."

Riverpaw felt his words deep in her bones, he meant every single word. The dark look in his amber eyes just reinforced his words.

"Now run home little AshClan kit, I'd hate for you to get caught."

Falconclaw lifted his paw and and Riverpaw scrambled to her paws, racing to the other side of the border. Echopaw and Graypaw followed her and the three apprentices ran far away from the SunClan border. They skidded to a stop when they were far enough away, Riverpaw's heart was pounding painfully in her chest and she couldn't stop trembling.

"That was crazy!" Graypaw laughed. "You just came face to face with SunClan's most dangerous warrior!"

"Shut up!" Echopaw shouted. "She could've died!" Echopaw turned to Riverpaw. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." Riverpaw replied, her voice shaking. She met Echopaw's gaze and her blood turned cold with how her sister was looking at her. *She's looking at me like I'm weak.* Riverpaw forced herself to look brave. "It was nothing." She held her head high. "He wasn't *that* scary."

"You liar!" Echopaw hissed, her gaze filling with anger. "Whatever," Echopaw turned away. "You can finish this hunting party without me." She started walking away. "You know, Riverpaw, being reckless doesn't make you brave."

Riverpaw reeled back. "How would you know?" Riverpaw asked, her voice cold. "Like you know anything about be brave." She chuckled.

Hurt flashed in Echopaw's eyes. "At least I know how to be smart!" She turned away and vanished into the snowy pine trees. Riverpaw rolled her eyes, Graypaw laughed but deep down inside Riverpaw's stomach, the fear was still there. *I could've died today.* Riverpaw thought. *And it would've been my own fault.*

Chapter 15

I can do this. It's finally time. I know I can do this. Riverpaw paced in circles in front of the apprentice den, her tail tip twitching with anticipation. In just a few short moments, Riverpaw and Echopaw would be having an assessment, their final assessment, the one that would make them warriors. Riverpaw was impatiently waiting for Goldenstar to finish having a small meeting with Ivyheart.

The AshClan leader was still weak from her illness, and Riverpaw was worried that her assessment would have to cancelled. She would never live it down if Echopaw became a warrior for her. Riverpaw looked at her sister, she was slowly flexing her claws in the small layer of snow, her eyes intense and worried. Ripplestep was sitting beside her, his eyes relaxed. *Ripplestep is a kind mentor, he'll probably pass her no matter what.*

Riverpaw glanced at the leader's den. *Goldenstar is so much more strict, I actually have to perform well if I want this.* She flattened her ears and took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. After a few moments, Riverpaw finally saw movement at Goldenstar's den. Riverpaw sprang to her feet, only for her heart to drop as Ivyheart approached instead.

"Where's Goldenstar?" Ripplestep questioned.

"Is my assessment cancelled?" Riverpaw asked, trying not to show how scared she really was.

Ivyheart shook her head with a chuckle. "Goldenstar's sickness took a lot out of her, Eagleclaw wants her to remain in camp for the time being so I will be the one looking over your assessment."

Riverpaw slumped her shoulder slightly. "You will?"

"I know I'm no leader," Ivyheart narrowed her eyes. "But trust me when I say I will be reporting every single thing you do to Goldenstar, including every mistake. Don't think I'll go any easier

on you than she would, she specifically told me to pay attention to every little action you make, Riverpaw."

Riverpaw lifted her head, she knew that Ivyheart and Goldenstar were close, she would have to do everything right. "Alright," Riverpaw nodded. "Can we get going now?"

"Goldenstar warned me you were impatient." Ivyheart whipped her tail. "But yes, let's get out into the forest." She looked at Ripplestep. "Are you ready?"

Ripplestep nodded. "Let's head out." The four cats headed out, Ivyheart and Ripplestep walking side by side into the snowy forest. "This will be a difficult assessment," Ripplestep began. "But neither of you wanted to wait for leaf-bare to be over."

Riverpaw nodded slowly. Both of them had been asked if they wanted to wait, but Riverpaw couldn't wait a moon longer. She had been working her tail off, even with Goldenstar basically being confined to camp. "As warriors we'll have to hunt in the snow every time leaf-bare comes around," Riverpaw pointed out. "Might as well get used to it now."

"That's a fair point." Ivyheart noted. Riverpaw glanced at the deputy, she still felt unsure about having Ivyheart as Goldenstar's stand in. She hadn't even taken on a temporary mentor during this time because she knew that Goldenstar was the only mentor for her. *It's just for one day.* Riverpaw reminded herself. *Then I'll be free of any mentor.* Despite that, Riverpaw didn't want to stop learning from Goldenstar. The leader had so much to teach her. *She only has two lives left. I have to spend all the time with her that I can.*

Once the group of cats was deep enough into the forest, they came to a stop. "We'll split up here," Ripplestep announced. "Echopaw, you will hunt towards the gathering hollow border, and Riverpaw you will hunt near the SunClan border." Riverpaw couldn't help but tense as she recalled what had happened on the SunClan border less than a moon ago. Falconclaw's deadly eyes flashed in her mind.

She noticed Echopaw staring at her, which Riverpaw promptly ignored. *I wasn't scared, and I won't be scared of that border. As long*

as I don't cross it, there's nothing to worry about. "Remember we will be watching you the entire time." Ivyheart added. "So preform at your best, any mistakes will be counted against you."

Riverpaw took a deep breath, flexing her claws. The air was bitter, the snow and frost would make it difficult to hunt but Riverpaw would make sure to have a perfect session today. *Any mistake, any slip up, could cost me my entire assessment.* She held her head high. *I won't fail.*

Riverpaw didn't wait any longer, she set her paws out into the pine trees. Her nose instantly in the air, scanning for prey. Prey would be scarce, and it was chilly outside but the sun was shining. *The best day we could ask for during leaf-bare.* Between the scent of pine and frost, Riverpaw caught the taste of squirrel.

She dropped into a crouch, making sure her form was nice and neat. She slowly crept through the forest, her pawsteps completely silent. Her blue eyes scanned the white spaces in front of her and through the white, she caught a splash of red. A squirrel was digging through the snow.

Riverpaw lowered her body, her belly fur barely grazing the forest floor beneath her. She crept forward silently, and when the time was right, she pounced. She landed squarely on the squirrel, pinning it to the ground and killing it with a swift nip to the back of the neck. *Perfect.* She thought proudly.

Without waiting, Riverpaw buried her squirrel and continued on. *No time to waste.* Riverpaw ventured deeper into the forest, keeping slow and silent. After moving only a few foxlengths, Riverpaw caught the scent of another squirrel. She tracked it towards the river, making sure she wasn't anywhere near the SunClan border.

The squirrel was at the base of a large pine tree gathering its own food. *I have to be quick.* Riverpaw noted, crouching down. If she made even a small mistake, the squirrel would be long gone into the tree. There wasn't enough room for her to pounce without risking her slamming her muzzle into the tree.

Riverpaw cleared her mind, making sure there were no obstacles in

her path. Flexing her claws and zoning in on her target, Riverpaw charged forward. She kicked up a flurry of snow and the squirrel began running for the tree. *You won't get away from me.* Riverpaw declared and continued her chase.

The squirrel's paws hit the tree trunk, but it was too late. Riverpaw leapt, her claws sinking into the squirrel's back and pulling it back down to the ground where she killed it. Riverpaw felt a rush of pride and exhilaration. *I'd like to see Echopaw tear a squirrel out of a tree.* She happily buried her catch and continued.

The next scent she caught was that of a sparrow. *I thought all the birds were gone.* Riverpaw pondered. *But this one is about to become AshClan prey.* The small bird was in a wide clearing, pecking at the frozen ground. *Stupid bird.* Riverpaw laughed to herself. She knew to never take it easy on birds, and to also use as much speed as possible. *Birds can easily get away from even the most skilled warriors.* Goldenstar had told her. *You have to be fast, smart and cunning.*

Riverpaw didn't want to give this bird any time to reach. She bunched up her muscles and sprang forward, her paws beating heavily in the forest floor. The bird opened its wings, but it had no chance. She caught it with her claws and killed it easily. *So far so good.* Riverpaw could feel her heart pounding. *Two chases already.* She thought. She knew that Ivyheart was watching too. *I'll give her something to report.*

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Riverpaw's claws struck the mouse, killing it instantly. She looked down at the small creature. *Another easy catch.* She thought. Her assessment had been going exceptionally well, she was quite proud of herself. In addition to the mouse, and the three pieces of prey she caught earlier she had caught two more squirrels and another mouse, giving her seven pieces total. She had learned from Lionclaw's assessment that he had caught five. *His assessment wasn't even in leaf-bare.*

Riverpaw sniffed the air, she could tell she was getting close to the SunClan border and wanted to avoid that as much as possible. She started to continue, but the rustling of pine needles stopped her in

her tracks. Riverpaw tensed up and extended her claws, half expecting to see Falconclaw.

Instead, Ivyheart stepped into the open. "Relax, Riverpaw. It's just me." Riverpaw retracted her claws as she faced the deputy. "Why so nervous?"

"Goldenstar told me to always be on my guard, even in my own territory." It wasn't a total lie, Goldenstar had told her that before.

"Fair enough." Ivyheart dipped her head. "Anyway, your assessment is over. Let's return to camp."

"Did I pass?" Riverpaw questioned.

Ivyheart let out a low chuckle. "That's not for me to decide, I have to return to camp to tell Goldenstar everything."

Riverpaw tensed ever so slightly, but gave a nod. They two she-cats ventured back towards AshClan camp, picking up Riverpaw's prey along the way. They met up with Ripplestep and Echopaw on their way pack, Riverpaw looked over Echopaw's catch, noticing she had caught eight pieces of prey, most of which were mice.

Riverpaw felt a bitter sting in her chest. *I can't believe Echopaw caught more than I did.* She looked at Ivyheart resentfully. *If only I had more time.* Riverpaw suppressed her annoyance and looked at her sister. "Good job." She mewed, Echopaw's eyes softened.

"You too." *I can't ignore her forever, she is a good hunter, I can admit that.* With all their prey gathered, they finally returned to camp. While Riverpaw, Echopaw and Ripplestep set the prey on top of the pile, Ivyheart went to Goldenstar's den.

"Good job you two." Graywillow mewed as she watched them put their catch down. "I haven't seen this much prey since the first snow fall.

Riverpaw accepted the warrior's compliment, but it didn't mean much to her. *There's only one opinion I'm interested in hearing.* She cast her gaze impatiently towards Goldenstar's den.

"Welcome back you two." A familiar voice spoke and Riverpaw turned to see her parents facing her. "How did it go?" Jayclaw questioned

"We're waiting on Ivyheart to report everything about Riverpaw to Goldenstar." Ripplestep explained.

"How much prey did you catch, Riverpaw?" Jayclaw asked, clearly ignoring Ripplestep.

"Seven." Riverpaw replied. "Four squirrels, two mice and a sparrow."

"And you, Echopaw?" His gaze grew more intense and Echopaw shifted uncomfortably.

"Eight. Six mice and two squirrels."

"Impressive." Echopaw relaxed. "You've certainly improved your skills." His gaze shifted his gaze back to Riverpaw "I'm surprised you didn't catch more."

Riverpaw faced her father without fear. "I would've, if I had more time."

"Echopaw would have too."

Riverpaw narrowed her eyes. "All my catches were perfect, not a single paw out of place."

Jayclaw chuckled. "I suppose we'll have to see what Ivyheart tells Goldenstar." At his words, both Goldenstar and Ivyheart stepped out into the camp. Despite Goldenstar's slightly frail appearance, she still looked powerful and regal as her golden pelt shimmered in the sunlight.

Goldenstar approached her apprentice and looked at Riverpaw with a fierce golden gaze that Riverpaw couldn't read. "Ivyheart told me everything," she mewed. "That your skills were on point, clean and effective. Not a single missed catch or step out of place." Riverpaw held her head high, holding her breath. "I suppose that means you pass."

Riverpaw subtly breathed out a sight of relief. "Thank you, Goldenstar." She bowed her head. "You too, Ivyheart." She reluctantly thanked the deputy. *I just wish Goldenstar could've seen it herself.*

"You did all the work, Riverpaw." Ivyheart purred.

"And Ripplestep? How did Echopaw do?" The leader questioned.

"She was determined and focused the entire time. She caught one more piece of prey compared to Riverpaw, and had no misses. She did an incredible job."

"Then that would mean you pass as well." Goldenstar's eyes sparkled. "Let's go have ourselves a ceremony."

Riverpaw looked at her sister who was clearly excited, and Riverpaw felt the same excitement brewing inside of her. They followed Goldenstar who moved to the center of camp and sat down on the small pile of rocks. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!" Goldenstar's voice wasn't as strong as it usually was, but she still grabbed the attention of every AshClan cat. Riverpaw and Echopaw sat side by side, waiting for AshClan to gather.

Riverpaw caught the eyes of Moonpaw who watched from the medicine cat den, her blue eyes sparkling. *I wish she could be here with us, but she'll get her true medicine cat name in time.* The Clan finally settled and Goldenstar began speaking. "I've called this meeting today because two of our apprentices have passed their assessments and are ready to earn their warrior names." All eyes looked at the two sisters, Echopaw ducked her head slightly but Riverpaw held her head high.

"Echopaw. Riverpaw." Goldenstar mewed loudly. "Do you two promise to uphold the warrior code, and defend the Clan, even at the cost of your lives?"

"I do." Echopaw replied, her voice steady.

"I do." Riverpaw made sure her voice was bold and confident.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior names." Goldenstar rose to her paws and faced the two apprentices. "Echopaw, you may not strive to become a leader, and you may not be a medicine cat, but you have proven yourself to be a loyal and dedicated warrior." Echopaw's eyes glowed with surprise at Goldenstar's words. "I've seen you grow from a timid apprentice to a mighty hunter. You have earned this just as much as your sister. From this day forward you will be known as Echoheart, AshClan honors your determination and loyalty."

Echoheart stepped forward as she licked Goldenstar's shoulder, and Goldenstar rested her muzzle on Echoheart's forehead. Echoheart stepped back, looking like an entirely new cat. *She really has grown, hasn't she?*

Goldenstar faced Riverpaw now, Riverpaw met her leader's proud gaze. "Riverpaw, from the moment you stepped out of the nursery I could see the drive in your eyes. You strive not only for greatness, but to go beyond what you think is perfection. You never stop pushing yourself, and I hope you never quell the storm inside of yourself. For that storm drives you, and is what makes you push yourself. That is why, from this day forward you will be known as Riverstorm, AshClan honors your dedication and ambition." Relishing in her new name, Riverstorm stepped forward, licking her leader and mentors shoulders. Goldenstar rested her muzzle on her forehead and Riverstorm stepped back with her sister.

"StarClan welcomes you both as full warriors of AshClan." Goldenstar finished the ceremony.

"Echoheart! Riverstorm! Echoheart! Riverstorm!" The cats of AshClan cheered their newest warriors and Riverstorm felt pride flowing through her body. *I'm finally a warrior.* She looked up towards the blue sky, just as snow began to fall slowly over the forest. *But I'm not stopping there, there's so much more for me to learn and I'm ready to become the greatest warrior AshClan has ever seen.*

Chapter 16

For the first time in moons, Echoheart could hear birds. She slowly lifted her head and blinked away sleep. She was in the dimly lit apprentice den, and from the sound of birds and the gentle sunlight outside, she could tell it was still early. Graypaw and Lilypaw were sleeping soundly in their nests, while Riverstorm's was empty.

Despite being warriors for almost a whole moon, Echoheart and Riverstorm remaind in the apprentice den due to the lack of space. She knew Riverstorm hated it, but Echoheart didn't really mind. She was glad to finally be a warrior, and she knew Riverstorm was delighted as well. She was always out of camp, working hard.

Echoheart always admired Riverstorm's hard work, but it seemed as if their relationship had faded even further. When Riverstorm had been attacked by Falconclaw, Echoheart had begun to doubt her sister's intentions. She was reckless, not brave and it made Echoheart fear for Riverstorm's safety. *She could easily get herself killed.* Echoheart shook her head, she needed to stop worrying so much about Riverstorm. *She's a warrior. She can take care of herself.*

Echoheart stepped out into AshClan's camp and breathed in the early newleaf air. She was so glad that leaf-bare was finally over, especially have AshClan suffered the loss of Tawnyfrost. *I'm glad it wasn't more.* Echoheart thought to herself, glad that it had stayed out of the nursery.

Echoheart glanced over at the nursery where Featherkit was playing with Olwstorm in front of the nursery. Behind him, Hollytail watched carefully over Leafkit and Petalkit who were starting to wander. The two she-cats were barely a moon and a half old, but were quite small. They were just recently starting to wander around.

Moonpaw had explained to Echoheart that since they had been born a moon early, they would spent about a moon just sleeping with their mother, catching up on lost time. Now they were starting to

find their legs and explore. *They're so cute.* Echoheart thought with a purr. Part of her longed to have kits of her own, but that seemed like such a far off dream.

"Hey, Echoheart!" Echoheart's ears twitched as she heard the call of Ripplestep and spotted her mentor padding up to her. "Goldenstar was wondering if you wanted to go to the gathering tonight." He questioned.

"Of course!" Echoheart rose to her paws. *This will be my first gathering as warrior!* She thought gleefully. She looked over at the crowd of AshClan cats starting to group up. She was glad to see Goldenstar back att he lead again after finally recovering from her sickness. *Now if only the cold weather would go away.*

They were early into newleaf and soon all the snow would melt away. Echoheart and Ripplestep quickly padded up to the rest of their Clanmates and Goldenstar led them out of camp. Echoheart walked beside her mentor, noticing that Riverstorm was up talking with Lionclaw and Hazelfern and Moonpaw was with Eagleclaw, talking about what herbs they needed to gather now that the weather was getting warmer.

Echoheart felt a sharp pang of loneliness stab at her heart. *I feel like I don't belong anywhere.* She looked at Graypaw who was talking up their upcoming assessment with Lilypaw and groups of warriors happy to be talking to each other. *Everyone seems to have someone to talk to. Except for me.* The thought felt bitter to Echoheart, she tried to shove her emotions away and focus on the gathering ahead of her. *I should be happy.* She reminded herself. *This is my first gathering as a warrior.* Echoheart forced herself to keep her head high.

AshClan arrived in the hollow, just after LichenClan. "Greetings, Goldenstar." Birdstar bowed her head at the AshClan leader. "Glad to see you back on your paws."

"Thank you, Birdstar." Goldenstar waved her tail. "Feels good to be back at my full strength." Echoheart sensed some hostility in Goldenstar's tone. *She's making sure Birdstar knows that she isn't weak. Though Birdstar doesn't seem like the kind of leader to take advantage of sickness.* Echoheart noted. *The only leader who do that is*

Goldenstar.

It didn't take long for Cloudstar to arrive with MoonClan behind her. "Welcome, Cloudstar." Goldenstar welcomed.

"Thank you." Cloudstar replied, but gave a venomous glare at Birdstar who simply ignored the other leader. *Is something going on between MoonClan and LichenClan?* Echoheart wondered, she hadn't seen such hostility between the two leaders before. The final Clan to arrive was SunClan with Foxstar at the lead.

"Newleaf may be here," Cloudstar mewed. "But it's still cold so let's get this gathering over with." Cloudstar jumped on her tree, barely giving the leaders any time to respond. "We want to welcome two new warriors," She mewed, the other leaders hadn't even sat down yet. "Frostfire and Icestorm." The Clans cheered, but LichenClan stayed bitterly silent. Echoheart felt the tension high in the air. *This is uncomfortable.* "Other than that, fish are starting to swim and the rabbits are starting to run. All is well in MoonClan." She sat down and it was Foxstar who stood up next.

"Things are well in SunClan, we welcome three new warriors. Applespots, Sandfoot and Sunstream!" The Clans cheered again, this time LichenClan joined in as well. Echoheart spotted the three she-cats sitting with their heads high. "Prey is running well and SunClan is regaining our strength after such a harsh leaf-bare."

Foxstar sat down and now it was Goldenstar's turn. "Things are wonderful in AshClan as well, we are as strong as ever with the addition of two new warriors. Please welcome Riverstorm and Echoheart!" Cheers rang out and Echoheart fought the urge to duck her head, feeling warmed by the welcome she and her sister had received.

The final cat to speak was Birdstar. "With the new season comes new ktis, our queen Daisyfern has moved into the nursery. Along with that news, everything is well in LichenClan and our prey is running strong."

Cloudstar didn't even wait for goodbyes, the gray and white leader simply jumped down from her tree and started gathering her Clan

to leave. "Something seems weird about Cloudstar and Birdstar." Echoheart heard Graypaw mutter to Lilypaw.

"Whatever it is," The stern voice of Dustclaw growled. "It is not our place to gossip about. Let's go." The Clans started to leave and Echoheart went to go search for Ripplestep. As she moved through the crowd, she collided with another cat.

"Sorry!" She hastily replied and rose to her paws, she figured it was another cat, but found herself muzzle to muzzle with a MoonClan cat named Cedarclaw. Cedarclaw had golden brown fur and handsome amber eyes. Her pelt suddenly started burning.

"It's okay, I should've been paying attention. I was just looking for my sister." Echoheart met his gaze and he stared down at her, his eyes wide. "S-sorry." He shook his head, breaking their gaze.

"No, no it's fine." She purred louder than she had planned to. "You're uh, you're Cedarclaw right? From MoonClan."

"Yeah." Cedarclaw replied, clearing his throat. "And you're Echoheart? The new AshClan warrior?"

Echoheart nodded. "Yeah, this is my first gathering as a warrior."

"Well congratulations." Cedarclaw waved his tail happily. "I became a warrior just a few moons ago."

"Cedarclaw!" Echoheart heard a harsh mew from a she-cat, she spotted a pale golden and white she-cat standing in the crowd.

"Coming!" Cedarclaw called to the she-cat. "Sorry, that's my sister." He dipped his head. "But it was nice meeting you Echoheart! I hope to see you at the next gathering."

"You too." Echoheart mewed, feeling like a dove watching him leave. Her heart skipping in her chest. *Wow.* She thought, then shook away the thought. *He's from another Clan.* Echoheart reminded herself before joining the rest of AshClan. *You can't swoon over any cat who's nice to you.* She told herself. *Even if he is handsome.* Her pelt burned. *There's nothing wrong with me thinking a cat from another Clan is attractive.* She assured herself.

She glanced at Riverstorm who was laughing at something with Cloverstrike and Lionpelt. *At least I had a pleasant conversation with someone, even if it was short lived.* That's what gatherings were for, afterall, being friendly with the other Clans.

Echoheart walked by Ripplestep's side as he talked to Berryleaf beside him, the two of them purring and their pelts brushing. *I want that kind of closeness.* Echoheart thought painfully. *I want to be close to someone, is that so much to ask?*

Chapter 17

"Graypelt! Lilyclaw! Graypelt! Lilyclaw!" The cats of AshClan cheered their newest warriors while Moonpaw watched from the medicine cat den. *I'm the only apprentice left.* Moonpaw watched, and though she longed to receive her full medicine cat name, she knew that it could take longer than normal apprenticeships. She glanced at Eagleclaw who showed no interest in the ceremony and was looking through the herb stores. *I'll get my medicine cat name when I'm ready.*

Moonpaw turned back into the herb store, their store was slowly starting to grow now that leaf-bare had released its icy grip on the forest. The days were gradually getting longer and the nights less chilly. Sickness was gone and the prey was returning. *Finally.* Moonpaw thought. She was glad that AshClan hadn't suffered so much, they had lost Tawnyfrost which had been tragic, and Goldenstar had lost a life, but they had also been blessed with three lively kits who would soon become apprentices.

Moonpaw knew that the warmer seasons would bring even more kits, Moonpaw had been watching her Clanmates to see was on the verge of becoming mates. The one that stood out to her the most was Lionpelt and Rainsong. The two of them were almost always together, it was obvious that the two of them were quickly falling in love.

Moonpaw had tried to see if either of her sisters were getting drawn into any tom cats but though Riverstorm was close to Lionpelt, she clearly had no thoughts of becoming mates with him. *I don't know if Riverstorm will ever have kits.* Moonpaw noted, then glanced towards Echoheart. She was congratulating Graypelt, waving her tail happily. *Maybe?* Moonpaw tilted her head. Echoheart would often fawn over the kits in the nursery, it was clear that she wanted some some day.

"Moonpaw!" Moonpaw as Eagleclaw hissed her name. She spun around to face her mentor. "If you're doing staring into the stars, we have to work to do."

"Sorry." Moonpaw ducked her head. "What do you want me to do?"

"We need to continue to restock our herb supplies. I want you to go out and get fennel and mallow leaves. We're completely out of mallow, and fennel isn't far off. Take a warrior with you to get some, there will be a lot to carry."

"Alright." Moonpaw dipped her head and stepped out into the camp, hoping she could enlist Echoheart to help her. Moonpaw quickly trotted up to her sister. "Are you busy?"

"Not really," Echoheart replied. "What do you need?"

"Someone to help me gather herbs, I know it's not the greatest task but--"

"Of course I'll go with you." Echoheart purred. "We never get to spend any time together, so I think this will be nice."

"Great." Moonpaw perked up and started leading her sister out of the camp and towards the river that marked the border with the gathering hollow.

"So what are we gathering?" Echoheart questioned with interest.

"Mallow and fennel." Moonpaw replied.

"What do those do?" Moonpaw felt warmed at her sisters genuine interest in her medicine cat life.

"Mallow leaves treat belly ache and fennel helped with pain in the hips, we use it for kitting with older queens especially." Moonpaw explained.

"There really is an herb for everything." Echoheart blinked.

"Just about." Moonpaw purred with amusement. The two of them reached the river and Moonpaw padded down the bank until she spotted the mallow. She was glad to see that it was growing well in the warmer weather. "We're not taking the flower," Moonpaw explained, pointing out the pale purple flower to her sister. "Just the leaves, and not all of them."

"It smells so sweet." Echoheart purred as she bit off several mallow leaves. Moonpaw picked up a few leaves, then continued farther down the river towards the LichenClan border. They reached the fennel plant which was also thriving.

"Bite at the base of the stalks, we use the juices inside." Echoheart nodded and followed Moonpaw's instruction. She also grabbed some fennel and the two she-cats were ready to go. They weren't able to talk as they both had jaws full of herbs, but they had a peaceful walk back together.

They stepped into camp and Moonpaw noticed Mousetail looking at them. "So you finally decided to give up and become a medicine cat, huh, Echoheart?" Moonpaw noticed her sister tense and get visibly annoyed. *What's wrong with being a medicine cat?* Moonpaw glared at the tom and lashed her tail. *Learn some respect you arrogant toad.*

Mousetail looked away and the two of them padded into the medicine cat den. "Good work." Eagleclaw praised, glancing at their stock. As they put the herbs into the herb store, Moonpaw looked at her sister.

"Mousetail was pretty rude out there."

"I'm used to it." Echoheart grumbled. "It's been happening more and more lately." She sighed. "It's not easy when your sister is Riverstorm and constantly outshines you, all the warriors have been flocking to her since they think she's just *so cool*."

"She's my sister too." Moonpaw pointed out.

"Yeah, but you're a medicine cat. You're not comparable to Riverstorm, she's a great warrior and she knows it. You're a great medicine cat but you're humble about it, I'm just a warrior trying my best and that's not good enough for this Clan I guess."

"You're focusing too much on what others think, Echoheart." The response came from Eagleclaw, both Moonpaw and Echoheart looked at him in interest. "What? You two chat like hens in my den I'm bound to overhear." He looked intently at Echoheart. "Your

sister is an arrogant warrior, she's young and full of energy and thinks she can take on anything but someday, she will get a wakeup call that will bring her back down with the rest of us."

Moonpaw wondered what her mentor meant by that, but it seemed to help Echoheart a little. Her murky green eyes lit up and she raised her head. "Well, thanks for letting me come, Moonpaw." Echoheart dipped her head and stepped out of the medicine cat den.

"Warriors focus far too much on what their Clanmates think of them." Eagleclaw shook his head. "me They need to just focus on being themselves." Eagleclaw thought for a moment then sighed. "Regardless, we don't have time to focus on the relationships between warriors." *But they're my sisters.* Moonpaw argued silently.

"The moonstone meeting is tonight and we're already running late." Eagleclaw noted. *Right.* Moonpaw realized. *I almost forgot.* "Let's leave before they start without us." After Eagleclaw finished setting his herbs aside, he and Moonpaw hurried out of the medicine cat den and into the forest.

The journey was easy and they made it just as the moon was taking its place in the sky. "There you are." Sagefeather mewed, waving her fluffy tail. "It's not like you to be late Eagleclaw."

Eagleclaw snorted. "Still trying to get all my herbs back in stock. Let's go, enough time has been wasted." Eagleclaw pushed forward, taking the charge. *We're the ones who were late.* Moonpaw thought with a purr of amusement.

"How do you handle him as a mentor?" Moonpaw heard the quiet voice of Honeywing beside her. "He seems like such a grumpy badger."

"He's a great medicine cat." Moonpaw purred. "I'm happy to be his apprentice." Moonpaw knew that the others saw Eagleclaw as an ill-tempered rude tom, and many times he was but he was also a great medicine cat dedicated to taking care of his Clan.

Moonpaw followed her mentor down into the cavern where Eagleclaw suddenly stopped, facing the other medicine cats. "Before

we begin," He spoke, Moonpaw looked at her mentor in confusion. "There's something I want to do." His intense amber eyes focused on Moonpaw. "For the past several moons Moonpaw has proved to be a kind, intelligent and quick learning apprentice. She took to herbs easily and is guided by not only her mind, but her heart as well. She's the best apprentice I ever could have asked for. I am often criticized for my temper but Moonpaw has the patience of a StarClan cat. That is why tonight, Moonpaw will be becoming a full medicine cat."

Moonpaw's jaw dropped. "Really?" She spoke up. "You think I'm ready?"

"I do." Eagleclaw dipped his head. "This leaf-bare wasn't easy, and thanks to your skills AshClan suffered very minimal loss. Your Clanmates already know your potential, as do I." Moonpaw didn't know what to say, she hadn't expected this so suddenly! "Are you ready?" Eagleclaw eyed her intensely, Moonpaw just nodded. "I, Eagleclaw, medicine cat of AshClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to to look down on this apprentice. She has trained hard to understand the ways of a medicine cat, and with your help she will serve her Clan for many moons." The other medicine cats watched intently, but Moonpaw's only focus was her mentor. "Moonpaw, do you promise to uphold the ways of a medicine cat, to stand apart from rivalry between Clan and Clan and to protect all cats equally, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." Moonpaw made sure her voice was confident, she had been dreaming of this moment since Featherstorm guided her to the medicine cat den.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your true name as a medicine cat." Eagleclaw stepped forward. "From this day forward, you will be known as Moonwhisker. StarClan honors your compassion, intelligence and dedication to your Clan. We welcome you as a full medicine cat of AshClan."

With her new name, Moonwhisker stepped forward, rasping her tongue along Eagleclaw's shoulder. Eagleclaw rested his muzzle on Moonwhisker's forehead for a brief moment before stepping back. "You've earned this." He added quietly.

"Moonwhisker! Moonwhisker! Moonwhisker!" The medicine cats cheered for Moonwhisker, and she relished in their praise.

"Now," Eagleclaw dipped his head. "Share tongues with StarClan for the first time as a true medicine cat."

Moonwhisker stepped forward, laying down before the Moonstone. She touched her nose to the cold, shimmering surface and darkness quickly took hold. When she opened her eyes she was back in the Spirit Woods, just outside the Spirit Tree. Before her sat Featherstorm, she looked on approvingly. "Congratulations, Moonwhisker." She bowed her head.

"Thank you." Moonwhisker returned the gesture. "I wasn't even sure I was ready."

"You always have been." Featherstorm praised, her gaze soon darkening. "However, as you and your sisters grow older your paths become more clear. If you don't act soon, one sister will be driven down a path that she will never return from."

"Can't you tell me which one?" Moonwhisker pleaded. "How can I help them if I don't know?"

"Keep watch for the signs, Moonwhisker." Featherstorm. "Not even I can see which sister it is. This path will lead to nothing but pain for not only your sister, but you and your Clanmates as well. I've seen spilled blood and a broken Clan. Act quickly, Moonwhisker, or you may lose both sisters."

"Wait!" Moonwhisker began to panic. *How could one of my sisters cause something like that?* "That doesn't make any sense! Riverstorm and Echoheart could never cause something like that!"

"I'm simply telling you what I've seen, Moonwhisker." Featherstorm lowered her head. "Follow the signs, Moonwhisker. It is not too late to save your sisters."

Moonwhisker watched helplessly as Featherstorm faded away, the Spirit Woods going with her. *What am I supposed to do? How do I know which sister will fall? I need help!*

Chapter 18

"Great catch, Riverstorm!" Lionpelt praised as Riverstorm tore the sparrow from the sky. She stood proudly over her kill, purring happily.

"I know." She admitted and turned back to the hunting patrol. "No prey escapes my claws." She held her head happily. She was leading the patrol, behind her she had Lionpelt, Graypelt, Cloverfoot, Rainsong and Mousetail. Even though she had only been a warrior for two and a half moons she was leading patrols constantly. *Goldenstar trusts me to get them done.* Riverstorm thought proudly.

"Let's continue." Riverstorm ordered after burying her kill. Newleaf was in full swing and the forest was full of prey just waiting to get in AshClan bellies. *AshClan is stronger than ever.* She boasted to herself. *It's strong warriors like me that keep AshClan as powerful as it is.* AshClan was one of the largest Clans in the forest, full of strong warriors.
Their apprentice den was empty, but Featherkit was nearing his apprentice ceremony as was Petalkit and Leafkit. Riverstorm was dying to have one of them as her apprentice, she wanted to raise an apprentice to be just as strong as she was. Riverstorm had no intention nor desire to have kits of her own, but she was dying to train a young apprentice.

Riverstorm led the patrol towards the SunClan border, Mousetail managed to catch a shrew, but as they neared the border, Riverstorm picked up something strange. Her nose twitched as she was overcome with the scent of SunClan. *Are they crossing the border?* Riverstorm padded up to the border and breathed in the scent.

"The scent of SunClan is *really* strong." Riverstorm pointed out.

"It would hope so," Lionpelt mewed. "This *is* the SunClan border."

"I know that, stupid." Riverstorm lashed her tail. "But it's stronger

than usual." She explained. "Is SunClan trying to send a message?"

"You sound just as paranoid as my mother." Lionpelt shook his head. "So they're border is a little stronger than usual. SunClan hasn't given us any reason to think they might attack us."

"But it could become something more." Riverstorm argued. "I need to tell Goldenstar."

Lionpelt sighed. "Do what you want, but I know my mother and this will probably turn into a fight that doesn't need to happen." The golden tabby tom vanished into the trees with a huff, Rainsong quickly following him.

"You really think SunClan is going to try something?" Graypelt questioned.

"SunClan has never had their border this strong before." Riverstorm explained. "It *has* to mean something."

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"This is troubling to say the least." Goldenstar mewed, listening intently to Riverstorm's report. "SunClan is clearly trying to send a message." Riverstorm listened eagerly, glad that Goldenstar understood.

"Are you sure, Goldenstar?" Ivyheart spoke up. "SunClan hasn't given us any reason to think they might attack."

"Until now." Goldenstar's voice was low. "SunClan lost one of their well respected warriors as well as two kits during leaf-bare. They could be wanting to show off their strength." Goldenstar rose to her paws. "But I won't let that happen. Peace has gone on long enough, we can't have any cat thinking they can test AshClan's borders."

Riverstorm stood up with their leader. "What are we going to do?" She questioned.

"We're going to show SunClan to respect the borders more." Goldenstar lashed her tail and stepped out of the den. Ivyheart cast an uneasy glance at Riverstorm who promptly ignored the deputy.

Goldenstar is right. AshClan must prove their strength. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!" Goldenstar raised her voice above the trees, Riverstorm sat down not far from her leader, she felt envious of Ivyheart. *I would make a better deputy than her.* Riverstorm thought. *I would never question Goldenstar.*

"Not long ago, there was a report of the SunClan border being stronger than usual. To me, it's clear that SunClan is trying to send a message. They want to press our borders, and we can't allow that to happen. It's easy in times of peace to forget the strength that AshClan has. We need to show SunClan that we are still strong."

"Are we leading an attack against SunClan?" Cinderflower spoke up. "Is that such a good idea?"

"We're not starting a war." Goldenstar assured the warrior. "This is simply a show of power. We're just going to ruffle some pelts." Her eyes sparked. "If any of you wish to stay behind, then fine. Those willing to fight stay gathered."

Riverstorm didn't hesitate to stand by Goldenstar's side as well as most of the AshClan warriors. A select few, including Lionpelt, Rainsong, Ripplestep and Cinderflower walked away. Riverstorm spotted Echoheart hesitating. Riverstorm met Echoheart's gaze. *Is she going to fight with her Clan? Or hide like a coward?* Echoheart looked from Riverstorm to Ripplestep, before letting out a sigh. Echoheart joined her former mentor. *Figures.* Riverstorm snorted and turned to Goldenstar, ignoring her best friend and sister.

"We'll attack the first patrol we see." Goldenstar explained. "They will more than likely bring reinforcements. We're not looking to take anything from them, just to send them a message. If everyone is ready." Goldenstar looked across her warriors. "Let's not waste anymore time."

The battle patrol moved through the trees with confidence, Riverstorm walked proudly beside Goldenstar. This was her very first battle, and she was ready to show SunClan what she was made of. *I've trained for this.* Riverstorm hyped herself up. *SunClan will face the wrath of my Claws!*

The neared the border and Goldenstar raised her tell, signalling the patrol to stop. "We'll make it seem like a small attack at first. Riverstorm, you'll lead the first assault." Riverstorm held her head high. "Take Robinflight, Ravenfur, Graywillow and Gorsestrike with you. Once you see the patrol, give your signal and lead the fight. Then I will follow up with the rest of the Clan."

"Understood." Riverstorm looked to the patrol, they were all senior warriors under her command. *Goldenstar trusts me. I won't fail her.* "Follow me and stay silent." As she ducked into the undergrowth, Riverstorm caught the approving nod of her father who stayed with the rest of the Clan.

Riverstorm crept up to the border, she was glad the wind was blowing towards them. *They'll never see us coming.* She lowered her head, eyes scanning for the sights of SunClan warriors. Her ears twitched as she heard the voice of an approaching patrol. They soon stepped into view, led by Briarheart. Behind him was Frostclaw, Flintstripe, Rainears and Sandfoot.

Riverstorm cleared her mind, unsheathing her claws. She lashed her tail, giving the signal. The AshClan patrol exploded out of the brush towards the unsuspecting SunClan border patrol. Riverstorm's first target was the leader of the patrol. Riverstorm leapt, her body slamming into Briarheart.

The SunClan tom fell to the ground and Riverstorm battered at his side, raking her claws down his shoulder. He hissed in pain and sank his teeth into Riverstorm's foreleg. Riverstorm let out a hiss of pain and slammed her other paw down on Briarheart's head, dazing him.

Riverstorm felt another body slam into hers as Frostclaw knocked her down. Riverstorm jumped to her paws and bared her teeth. "Briarheart! Go warn the others!" Frostclaw told him and after recovering for a moment, Briarheart scrambled to his paws. *Go ahead, Briarheart. We'll be waiting for you.*

Riverstorm charged the white she-cat, yowling as she did so. She could tell that Frostclaw was going for a low attack so Riverstorm leapt over the she-cat. She landed gracefully on her paws and

whipped around, raking her claws down Frostclaw's hind leg. Frostclaw hissed in pain and swiped at Riverstorm. Riverstorm felt claws tear through her cheek, causing her to stumble back slightly.

"AshClan! Attack!" Riverstorm heard Goldenstar's cry and the rest of AshClan swarmed the small patrol. The patrol quickly realized they couldn't win and started to retreat."Chase them into their territory! We'll meet SunClan head on!"

The AshClan cats gave chase, Riverstorm stayed close to Frostclaw snapping at her tail. *Run little SunClan warrior! Feel the wrath of AshClan!* It didn't take long for Foxstar to appear at the crest of SunClan territory, his eyes enraged. The rest of SunClan joined the fight and soon the yowls and hiss of battle filled the air.

Riverstorm jumped on to Frostclaw once again, pinning the she-cat on her back and battering at her belly. Frostclaw sank her claws into Riverstorm's shoulder and flipped both of them on their side. Frostclaw delivered several heavy blows to Riverstorm's belly.

Riverstorm lost her grip on the she-cat and Frostclaw scrambled to her paws, running into the forest. Riverstorm rose to her paws, barely feeling the sting of her wounds. *That's a win for me.* Riverstorm declared and look for more cats to fight. She spotted Graywillow fighting Suntream, bleeding from a wound on her back while Sunstream had a nasty bite on her leg.

She also noticed Hazelfern running in retreat from Rainears and Flowerpelt. A sudden cry split the air and Riverstorm realized it came from Foxstar. Through the trees, Riverstorm could see the SunClan's leader body on the ground, unmoving with Goldenstar standing proudly over him. *Did Goldenstar take one of his lives?* Riverstorm thought, her blood turning cold. Riverstorm's concentration was broke as she saw Flowerpelt running towards Goldenstar. *Not on my watch!*

Riverstorm cut Flowerpelt off, throwing the gray she-cat to the ground. She sank her teeth deep into Flowerpelt's shoulder and raked her claws across her pale gray fur, feeling flesh tear beneath her claws. Flowerpelt struggled helplessly as Riverstorm pinned her down, her flailing paws struck Riverstorm, ripping through her pelt.

Riverstorm hissed and bit down harder on Flowerpelt's shoulder. *You're not going anywhere.* She growled.

Riverstorm felt teeth digging into the back of her neck and she was lifted with great force from Flowerpelt. Riverstorm hissed and thrashed but was thrown helplessly to the side like a piece of fresh-kill. Her body slammed against the hard ground, kicking up leaves and stones digging into her pelt.

Her head slammed against a rock and Riverstorm was dazed. The world around her started to blur and spin. *Fox-dung!* She cursed, trying to recover. "Riverstorm!" She heard the cry of Lilyclaw and her Clanmate ran up to her. She saw multiples of the she-cat, Riverstorm closed her eyes.

"I'm fine." She slurred, just dazed. Riverstorm took a couple moments to calm herself, though her head was still throbbing Riverstorm rose to her paws, the world still blurry but she could at least see. She spotted that Flowerpelt and Stonewhisker, the cat that had thrown her off, were running to Goldenstar and Foxstar but Riverstorm's father had also joined them. The battle was intense, Stonewhisker was attacking Goldenstar, his claws ripping at her chest.

Get away from her! Riverstorm tried to say, she moved forward but her legs gave out. Lilyclaw managed to catch her but Riverstorm couldn't help anymore. Jayclaw pulled Stonewhisker off Goldenstar, pinning her to the ground. Riverstorm watched as her father sank his teeth deep in Stonewhisker's neck, killing him.

"No!" Flowerpelt's shrill cry filled the air and she shoved Jayclaw off of Stonewhisker, she didn't stay to fight though. She ran back to the lifeless tom's body. "You killed him!" She wailed, Riverstorm noticed how alarmed Goldenstar looked. "And *you* killed my leader!" Flowerpelt's voice was filled with rage. Riverstorm noticed how similar Flowerpelt and Stonewhisker looked. *Is Stonewhisker her father?*

Flowerpelt slumped down beside the tom while Foxstar finally rose to his paws. "Goldenstar." Foxstar spoke, looking exhausted. "Have you proven your point? Leave our territory."

Goldenstar narrowed her eyes, the alarm she had shown now a thing of the past. "AshClan!" She raised her voice. "We're leaving."

Lilyclaw helped Riverstorm on her paws and AshClan began heading back to their own territory. *No one was supposed to die.* Riverstorm couldn't fight the bitter taste on her tongue thinking about Stonewhisker's death.

The walk back to camp seemed to take forever and Riverstorm was incredibly dizzy, her head was pounding. When they finally reached camp, the cats of AshClan began going to the medicine cat den. "Goldenstar," Riverstorm heard Ivyheart's voice. "Why did you take one of Foxstar's lives."

"It wasn't my intention, Ivyheart." Goldenstar replied. "He was trying to take one of mine, I had to defend myself. I didn't want Stonewhisker to die, but Jayclaw was protecting his leader. Stonewhisker was trying to take one of my lives as well. Stonewhisker knew the risks of being a warrior, we all take the same oath."

"Goldenstar--" Riverstorm broke away from Lilyclaw, trying to stand on her own two legs. Riverstorm didn't even know what she was trying to say. "Stonewhisker died a warrior's death." She mewed, her voice slurring even more.

"Riverstorm you--" As Goldenstar spoke, Riverstorm's legs gave out and she fell against the floor of the camp. "Take her to the medicine cat den, please. She's badly injured."

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Riverstorm's eyes slowly fluttered open. *I don't remember falling asleep.* She noted to herself before realizing she was in the medicine cat den. "Oh thank StarClan you're awake." Riverstorm heard the voice of Moonwhisker, her sister looking at her happily. "You were out for almost two days."

"Really?" Riverstorm tilted her head, her head had a dull throb but it wasn't as bad as after the battle. Last thing she recalled was talking to Goldenstar after the battle. "What happened?"

"You had a minor concussion." Moonwhisker explained. "You woke up several times but didn't say much. I was worried the damage was more severe. How do you feel?"

"My head hurts and I'm thirsty." She replied, her throat feeling dry.

Eagelclaw stepped into the medicine cat den, looking as annoyed as ever. "Oh good, the mighty warrior is awake." Riverstorm winced at his tone.

"Did I do something?"

"All the warriors did something." Eagleclaw growled. "So eager to fight pointless battles. Hope you enjoy headaches, Riverstorm, because you'll have them for several days. You can thank Goldenstar for that."

"Goldenstar did what she thought was best for the Clan." Riverstorm growled.

"Right I forgot who I was talking to." Eagleclaw snorted and walked to the back of the den. "Stupid warriors."

"What's his problem?" Riverstorm questioned his sister.

Moonwhisker sighed. "He thinks the battle was unnecessary, and so do I." Moonwhisker nudged some poppy seeds towards Riverstorm. "But we can't change the past, luckily you were the worst injury other than Roseclaw who has a pretty bad wrenched claw. I wish I could say the same for SunClan, Stonewhisker didn't have to die."

"He die protecting his Clan." Riverstorm explained. "A warriors death. I could've died as well, we all could have."

"Not if Goldenstar didn't start the fight." Moonwhisker slowly shook her head. "You don't get it, Riverstorm. Most warriors don't. You're free to walk around, let me know if your headaches get too bad."

Riverstorm rose to her paws, feeling slightly dizzy. *What do medicine cats know?* She thought with a snort, leaving the den. *I trust Goldenstar's judgement. I will always stand by her side, I took an oath to die for this Clan.*

Chapter 19

"With that, I say this gathering is at an end." Birdstar spoke, ending the gathering. "I say we enjoy the lovely weather and talk for a bit." The elderly leader jumped down from the tree and began talking with Foxstar. Echoheart could feel a sharp tension in the air, no one would talk about it though. There was the strange tension between LichenClan and MoonClan that only seemed to get worse with each passing gathering but now the tension between SunClan and AshClan.

It had been a moon since Goldenstar lead an unprovoked attack against SunClan that resulted in the death of the SunClan warrior Stonewhisker. SunClan didn't mention anything about the fight other than announcing Stonewhisker's death and casting hateful glances towards Goldenstar who held her head high without regret.

The Clans were talking, but SunClan weren't talking to AshClan cats and LichenClan wasn't talking to MoonClan. Echoheart hadn't participated in the fight, she didn't see a point to it. Though most of her Clanmates did, and they happily followed Goldenstar into combat. No AshClan warriors were severely injured, the worst had been Roseclaw and Riverstorm.

Echoheart had feared for her sister's safety when she returned, but she quickly recovered and returned to her old self in a few short days. *She would follow Goldenstar off a cliff.* Echoheart thought bitterly. Echoheart didn't think that Goldenstar had made the right choice, there was no reason to attack SunClan and kill one of their warriors, and what made it worse; the warrior had been killed by Echoheart's father.

Jayclaw had explained himself saying that he refused to let Stonewhisker take one of Goldenstar's nine lives. He had been hailed a hero, but Echoheart didn't feel the same way. *The warrior code says we shouldn't kill other cats.* Echoheart flicked her ear. *Goldenstar had lives to spare, Stonewhisker didn't. Maybe if Goldenstar had lost a life she would have seen how stupid that fight had been.*

However, since AshClan hadn't suffered any losses, Goldenstar and the rest of AshClan would see it as a victory.

"Hey there." A sudden voice made Echoheart nearly jump out of her pelt. She shot to her paws and spun around to see Cedarclaw. "Woah there," He chuckled, amber eyes sparkling. "Didn't mean to scare you."

Echoheart managed to calm down her racing heart. "It's okay." Her pelt burned. "I was just lost in though."

"How are you tonight? I was worried you didn't come." Cedarclaw stepped closer to Echoheart, she could feel her stomach flipping.

"I'm good." She purred without thinking. "You?"

"I'm good as well." Cedarclaw waved his tail. Since Echoheart and Cedarclaw met at the gathering three moons ago they made a point to speak at every gathering. The MoonClan was kind and made Echoheart feel like she actually had a friend. "What is going on between you and SunClan by the way? Does it have something to do with the SunClan cat that died?"

I can't tell him everything. "There was a border fight that went wrong, I wasn't involved though."

"Hopefully SunClan doesn't hold that against you." He lowered his voice. "Several moons ago, when I was still an apprentice, there was a border skirmish that resulted in the death of one of our warriors. Owlstar waged war on LichenClan and Cloudstar hasn't let it go yet." *So that's what happened.* "Please don't tell anyone." Cedarclaw begged. "Cloudstar doesn't want the other Clans getting involved."

"I won't." Echoheart mewed. "I promise."

Cedarclaw's eyes sparkled. "You know, Echoheart." He cleared his throat. "I really enjoy talking to you, I feel like I can tell you anything."

Echoheart's pelt burned deeply. "I feel the same way." She admitted. *He doesn't know my sister, he just knows me. He doesn't tear me down.*

"I wanted to--"

"Cedarclaw!" A sharp mew spoke from near the cluster of MoonClan cats, it was Amberfrost. "We're leaving!"

"Alright!" Cedarclaw called back. He quickly stepped forward. "Meet me here tomorrow night, I want to spend some time with you." He stepped back, and before Echoheart could even reply he vanished into the crowd of cats.

Echoheart stood frozen, staring after him in shock. *He wants to meet here? Alone?* Echoheart's heart pounded painfully in her chest, her stomach raged with butterflies. *He's from MoonClan. We can't meet in secret? Can we?*

"Echoheart!" A voice broke her thoughts and she faced Jayclaw who eyed her in annoyance. "Quit standing there like a blind hare, we're leaving." He pushed past her and Echoheart's pelt burned even more. *It's stupid.* Echoheart followed far behind her father, staying towards the back of the Clan with the elders.

Would it really be that bad? Echoheart questioned as she headed home. *We're just friends? I mean, I like him and he's handsome and sweet but I would never become mates with him or anything.* Echoheart's mind was spinning. *The warrior code says we can be friends, and we won't be trespassing on another Clan's territory.*

Echoheart shook her head. *Am I actually thinking about it?* She stared at her paws. *I couldn't imagine if I got caught, Goldenstar would have my pelt!* She looked around her, her Clanmates were all talking together. Several cats walked close together, their pelts brushing. So many AshClan cats had close friends and mates. *I want to be close to someone too.*

Anytime Echoheart tried to speak to anyone, they just brushed her away. *In their eyes, I'm not good enough.* Echoheart stared at Riverstorm, surrounded by a group of cats, laughing and talking. *I'm not her.* Echoheart's spirit fell. *But Cedarclaw doesn't care about Riverstorm.* She thought. *Cedarclaw likes* me.

They reached the Clan and Echoheart watched her Clanmates break

apart, leaving her alone. *I don't want to constantly feel alone, is that so much to ask?* Echoheart looked towards the direction of MoonClan territory. *Someone actually wants to spend some time with me.* She thought happily. *And I'm not going to let that go to waste.*

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Echoheart slowly crept out of the warrior's den, scanning the still AshClan camp. Two cats sat guard at either of end of camp, Berryleaf and Cloverstrike. Both she-cats were on high alert, Echoheart would have to be quiet. She pressed her body against the warrior's den, keeping her body low and her pawsteps silent. She slowly walked around the back, passing one of the large stones that surrounded their camp.

She slipped into the pine trees undetected and broke into a run, her heart racing inside of her chest. *I can't believe I'm doing this.* She thought, her paws feeling lighter than air as she reached through the forest. It didn't take long before Echoheart reached the river. As she stared at her reflection, she began to worry. *What if Cedarclaw changed his mind? What if he doesn't actually like being around me?*

For a moment, Echoheart contemplated turing around, but she had to at least try. She crossed the river and neared the hollow. It was strange seeing it so empty, it was almost eerie. She scanned the vast hollow util she finally spotted Cedarclaw sitting at the bottom of the trees, glancing up at the stars.

Echoheart approached slowly, her paws tingling with excitement. "Hi." She greeted sheepishly, getting his attention.

Cedarclaw looked down and his eyes warmed. "Hey," He rose to his paws and faced Echoheart. She could tell how nervous he was. *He's just as worried as I am.* "I was scared you wouldn't come."

"I didn't know if I would." Echoheart admitted, her heart still pounding from her run. "But I'm glad I did."

"Me too." Cedarclaw sat down, curling his tail across his paws. "Sit with me." Echoheart's pelt burned and she sat down beside Cedarclaw, he moved his tail so it draped across her shoulders. She

could feel the warmth coming from the warrior.

"So uh," She stared at the soft grass. "Why did you want me to come here?"

"Because I like spending time with you." Cedarclaw mewed, his voice like honey. "I wanted some alone time with you, without the eyes of all four Clans on us. You're such an interesting cat."

"I'm really not." Echoheart dropped her head. "You've only seen me at gatherings, you don't know what I'm really like."

"Then tell me." Cedarclaw urged.

Echoheart sighed. "None of my Clanmates think I'm worth anything, especially my sister and my father. My sister, Riverstorm, is a great warrior. She's strong, brave and confident. My other sister, Moonwhisker, is a medicine cat. She's respected and has a special role to play. I've made peace with the fact that my sisters are better than me, it's okay, but it hurts when I'm completely forgotten. Do I have to strive to be the best? Do I have to be reckless and ambitious? Why isn't wanting to bee a good AshClan warrior enough?" Echoheart realized she had dumped all of this information on Cedarclaw, her pelt burned and she ducked her head. "Sorry, that was a lot."

"It's okay," Cedarclaw assured her. "No offense, but AshClan seems like it's full of arrogant cats. Goldenstar especially, and I've seen Riverstorm at gathering. All she does is brag to other cats about how great she is." Echoheart met his gaze. "To me, a good warrior is one who tries their best no matter what, one who works with their Clanmates, not against them. Echoheart, you're a wonderful cat. I'd much rather be here with you than Riverstorm." Echoheart's pounded painfully in her chest, she couldn't keep up with her breaths. Their eyes locked together, amber into green.

The moment was silent, but a storm raged in Echoheart's chest. "I really like you, Echoheart." Cedarclaw's voice was barely above a whisper.

"I like you too." Echoheart whispered back. *This is wrong, but I don't*

want this feeling to go away. Cedarclaw edged forward slowly until his nose rested on Echoheart's. Echoheart closed her eyes, letting all of her fears and worries slip away. *I don't care that this is wrong.* She told herself. *I'm finally happy, and I'm not letting this feeling go.*

Chapter 20

Echoheart rose from her nest, letting out a heavy yawn. She had barely slept, but this was a feeling she had gotten used to. She climbed out of the den and looked over her camp, the warm sunshine welcoming her. Echoheart smelled the early greenleaf air, feeling energy and light despite her lack of sleep. She had been visiting Cedarclaw nearly every night for two moons now, and every night was better than the last.

They couldn't visit every night due to them sometimes needing to guard the camp over night or gatherings, but they met when they could. Echoheart had found true happiness, and part of her didn't care that she had found it in a MoonClan warrior. She had fallen in love, and that's all that mattered to her.

In the two moons since their first meeting, many things had changed for AshClan. Featherkit was named an apprentice a moon after, being assigned Mistypool as a mentor. Just a few days ago, AshClan also welcomed Leafpaw and Petalpaw as apprentices. They were given Cloverstrike and Mudthorn as mentors. Echoheart knew that Riverstorm had been secretly angered that neither apprentice had been given to her. *Good.* Echoheart had thought when Leafpaw and Petalpaw had their ceremony. *Last thing AshClan needs is one more cat like Goldenstar and Riverstorm.*

The nursery wasn't empty for long as Rainsong moved into the nursery just a few days after Featherpaw and Duskwhisker moved out, expecting Lionpelt's kits to no one's surprise. With her round belly, she would be giving birth any day now. About a moon ago, Ravenfur moved into the nursery as well, expecting Mousetail's kits.

Each time Echoheart saw the expecting queens, their bellies round and their mates doting on them, it filled Echoheart with jealousy. She wanted kits, she wanted to be in the nursery with the cat she loved. Echoheart thought constantly about having kits with Cedarclaw. There was part of her that hoped one day she would, she would happily leave AshClan behind and move to MoonClan to

raise their kits. She hadn't brought it up with Cedarclaw yet, but she knew he would want that as well.

"Echoheart!" She heard a voice call her name and turned to Ivyheart. The deputy was standing in the center of camp. "Come join the border patrol." Echoheart quickly padded over to her Clanmates, joining Ivyheart, Hazelfern, Spiderheart and Windheart. Without hesitation, the border patrol set out into the forest.

Echoheart found herself looking towards MoonClan territory, longing to be with Cedarclaw. *He's all I can ever think about these days.* "Hey, Echoheart." Lilyclaw spoke up. "You've been super giddy these past couple moons." She pointed out, causing Echoheart's pelt to burn. "Something you're not telling the rest of us?" She eyed Echoheart curiously. "Maybe a tom in your life?"

She's sharp. Echoheart noted. "Maybe." She purred. "But it's nothing official, I can't say anything just yet."

"Ooooh." Lilyclaw's eyes sparkled. "Come on, you have to tell me."

Echoheart shook her head. "It's a secret. If something comes up, then you'll know." Echoheart had almost already made up her mind about leaving the Clan. She wasn't scared, what life was there for her in AshClan? She could happily live in MoonClan, she would miss Moonwhisker and Mistypool as well as the pine trees, but she would be with the cat she loved. "It's only a matter of time, I hope." She told Lilyclaw.

Not even the jabs of her sister and Clanmates could get to Echoheart, she desperately wanted to tell Cedarclaw her true feelings. They hadn't officially told each other that they loved each other, but Cedarclaw *had* to feel the same way. Echoheart felt like a lovesick apprentice every time she was around him, their conversations could go on all night and she would never notice the time passing. *There's never enough time.* Echoheart thought sadly. *But if we were together always...*

The border patrol went without issue and the patrol returned to camp to find excitement buzzing in the air. Echoheart spotted Moonwhisker rushing back and forth between the medicine cat den

and the nursery. "What's going on?" She questioned Ripplestep who was watching from the fresh-kill pile.

"Rainsong is kitting." He explained. "She just started."

"How exciting." Ivyheart purred loudly. "We haven't had new kits since Leafpaw and Petalpaw were born."

New kits are always a good sign. Echoheart thought. *So why do I feel so jealous?*

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The sun began to set and with it came the birth of Rainsong's and Lionpelt's kits. Lionpelt proudly announced his two daughters Rosekit and Blossomkit. Cats rushed into the nursery to see them, even Goldenstar welcomed the kits. *They're her kin, I suppose.* Echoheart thought. *Though I didn't think Goldenstar actually cared about her family.*

"I can't wait until they're six moons old." Echoheart overheard Riverstorm talking to Graypelt.

"So sure you'll get to mentor one of them?" Echoheart spoke up, catching her sister's sharp gaze.

"Of course I will." Riverstorm snorted. "They're Goldenstar's kin, who else would she trust to mentor one of them other than me. Her own apprentice."

"Just because you were Goldestar's apprentice doesn't mean you're better than anyone else. There are cats older than you who deserve apprentices too."

"It's not about age, Echoheart." Riverstorm sneered. "It's about experience and skill. Which is why I'll get an apprentice before you ever do."

Echoheart rolled her eyes. "See I don't care, because I'm not in a rush to get an apprentice."

"No surprise there." Riverstorm twitched her tail. "You've never

rushed to do anything in your life, which might be why you're still no better than an apprentice."

Anger sparked inside of Echoheart and she rose to her paws. "Excuse me?" She hissed. Before Riverstorm could respond, Graypelt stepped in the way.

"Calm down now," Graypelt urged them. "Let's not start a fight."

"It wouldn't be much of a fight." Riverstorm growled before walking away, flicking her tail in annoyance. Graypelt followed behind and she joined with Cloverstrike and Mousetail. Echoheart rolled her eyes. *Stupid, Riverstorm. She needs to watch her mouth.* Echoheart would give anything just for once chance to claw the whiskers off of her sister.

The night went on and Echoheart found herself longing to see Cedarclaw with each passing moment. The argument with her sister and the birth of new kits had left Echoheart feeling incredibly emotional. *He's the only one who can calm my mind.*

Echoheart left camp the way she usually did, completely undetected. She padded confidently through the forest, taking the path she had for so long now. She reached the gathering hollow where Cedarclaw was waiting eagerly. "Good evening, beautiful." Cedarclaw purred.

Feeling soothed at his words, Echoheart touched her muzzle to his and pressed her body against his warm pelt. "How was your day?" He questioned after a moment, stepping back.

"Long." Echoheart sighed. "Almost got into a fight with my sister." She twitched her tail. "And Rainsong gave birth today."

"Is that bad?" Cedarclaw tilted her his head.

"No it just reminds me of how much I want kits." Echoheart explained. Cedarclaw's eyes suddenly filled with alarm.

"Y-you want kits?" He mewed, Echoheart felt fear grip her heart at his reaction.

"Someday," Echoheart touched her cheek to his. "But I'm not worried about it happening soon." He seemed to calm down slightly, but his body was still tense.

"I never even really thought about it." Echoheart's chest ached more. "What would even happen if you and I had kits."

"I guess I would move to MoonClan." Echoheart had to pretend like she hadn't been thinking about this nearly every day. "If Cloudstar would allow it, of course. If I had kits with a cat from another Clan, AshClan would hate me. More than they already do."

"Well," Cedarclaw took a deep breath. "That's not something we have to worry about right now. I'm not ready for kits," Upon seeing Echoheart's heartbroken reaction, he raised his voice a little. "Someday maybe, but for now I just want it to be you and me. I don't want anything to take these peaceful nights away from us."

He's right. Echoheart purred loudly, nuzzling into his fur. "I agree." These nights were perfect, she didn't need kits yet. She had him, and that was all she needed.

Chapter 21

"Set those leaves out to dry." Eagleclaw instructed Moonwhisker. She gave a nod as acknowledgment and gathered the leaves that Eagleclaw had set to the side while he was forming balls of moss in the back of the den. Moonwhisker set the leaves down to dry in the warm sunlight. After she was done, Moonwhisker closed her eyes and took a moment to bask in the sunlight. Things were peaceful around camp.

She could hear the sounds of active Clan life. Ivyheart organizing patrols, Featherpaw boasting about is training to Petalpaw and Leafpaw. The tiny Rosekit and Blossomkit playing with Lionpelt outside the nursery and Cinderclaw and Sandnose having a conversation outside of the elder's den. Moonwhisker opened her eyes, watching her Clan.

Things had been peaceful since Goldenstar had led an attack on SunClan, all injuries were healed up. Moonwhisker didn't agree with Goldenstar's decision to attack SunClan on such a small detail, and the loss of SunClan's warrior Stonewhisker sat bitter on her tongue. Moonwhisker knew that Eagleclaw resented Goldenstar for such a stupid choice, and Moonwhisker couldn't help but agree. The battle had done nothing but kill an innocent warrior and use up herbs.

Another thing that stuck in Moonwhisker's pelt like a burr was Riverstorm. Her sister followed Goldenstar so closely, and was happy to run into the battle without a second though. Riverstorm was brash, arrogant and reckless. She couldn't help but wonder if Riverstorm was treading down the wrong path as Featherstorm had warned her.

Echoheart was living a simple life as a loyal AshClan warrior, she had stayed behind during the fight and seemed to actually be quite happy these past few moons. Moonwhisker was worried about Riverstorm, and she was becoming more and more convinced that Riverstorm was heading down the dark path she had been warned

about. *I have to do something about it.* Moonwhisker told herself, she had to bring Riverstorm back from that path. *I know she wants to be leader, but what will happen if a cat like her becomes leader?*

Featherstorm had warned her of death and blood shed following her sisters, and Moonwhisker had to do everything to stop that from being the future that AshClan would have to face. *I need to talk to her, hopefully reason with her.* She glanced at Echoheart who was leaving on a hunting patrol. *I wonder if she could help.* Moonwhisker pondered, though Riverstorm and Echoheart hardly ever got along. *Perhaps if I can mend their relationship, Riverstorm won't go down that path!*

"Moonwhisker!" A sudden cry broke Moonwhisker's train of thought. She saw Rainsong standing at the nursery with wide eyes while Lionpelt held Rosekit and Blossomkit back. "It's Ravenfur! She's kitting!"

Moonwhisker rose to her paws quickly, she ran into the medicine cat den where Eagleclaw had already her Rainsong's cries. Together the two medicine cats gathered everything they needed and rushed into the nursery where Ravenfur was. The black queen was panting heavily, her claws shredding the bracken in her nest.

"Where's Mousetail?" She whimpered. "I want Mousetail." She was clearly panicking.

"You need to relax, Ravenfur." Eagleclaw grumbled. "Your kits need you to be brave right now."

"Mousetail left on the morning patrol." Lionpelt explained. "He should be back any moment."

"Lionpelt keep the kits back please." Moonwhisker asked him. "If you see Mousetail, send him this way."

Lionpelt dragged his daughters out of the nursery and kept them inside. Moonwhisker placed a tender paw on Ravenfur's belly, feeling a ripple. "They're coming very soon." She reported to Eagleclaw who nodded.

"It hurts so much." Ravenfur wailed. "I can't do this."

"Yes you can." Moonwhisker rasped her tongue across the queen's ears. "Your body is made for this, StarClan will guide your kits here to us. Have faith in us."

Ravenfur silenced herself, still letting out pained whimpered. Moonwhisker nudged her a stick which she took her jaws, Moonwhisker could see fear burning deep in the queen's yellow eyes. *She's really scared.* Moonwhisker noted. *And Rainsong wasn't nearly in this much pain, is something wrong?*

"The first kit is coming." Eagleclaw announced. Ravenfur let out a sheer cry and her teeth bit down on the stick, but after a few short moments a little bundle of fur fell into the nest at Eagleclaw's paws. "Moonwhisker, you know what to do."

Moonwhisker took the little bundle gently and nipped the sac open, rasping her tongue swiftly over the gray pelt of the kit. It didn't take long for the kit to let out a cry and start crying for food. Moonwhisker kept rasping her tongue over the kits spine, keeping it warm while Ravenfur delivered the rest of her kits.

"The next one isn't far off." Eagleclaw called.

"Ravenfur!" Moonwhisker recognized the voice of Mousetail and the tom burst into the nursery, running to his mate's side.

"I'm so glad you're here." Ravenfur panted.

"Of course." Mousetail ran his tongue over her forehead, soothing the queen.

Mousetail's eyes floated to the kit at Moonwhisker's paws. "Is that...one of my kits?"

Moonwhisker nodded, continuing to lick the kit.

"Alright, Ravenfur. Next one is coming." Ravenfur let out another wail, causing Mousetail to wince but the next kit came easily. "Rainsong." Eagleclaw said the other queen's name and she picked up the kit, this one pale brown. Not long after, a third kit came as

well, this one black.

"There's one more." Eagleclaw announced.

"Four kits!" Mousetail exclaimed. "I'm going to go mad!"

"Wait--" Eagleclaw suddenly broke off and Ravenfur let out a blood chilling cry of pain, splintering the teeth in her jaws. "Moonwhisker get over here now." He instructed fiercely.

"What's wrong?" Mousetail's voice began to panic. Moonwhisker set the kit she had with Rainsong and rushed over to her mentor, there was a lot of blood and the fourth kit was stuck. *What do I do? I've never seen this before!*

"What do we do?" Moonwhisker asked.

"What's happening?" Mousetail demanded. "Why is she in so much pain?"

"The kit is stuck." Eagleclaw explained. "Moonwhisker, I need you to gently grab the kit and pull on it. Don't be too rough." Moonwhisker nodded, forcing herself to keep her paws steady.

"Get away from me!" Ravenfur wailed. "It hurts! StarClan make it stop!"

"I need you to cooperate with us," Eagleclaw urged.

"She's in pain! Stop!"

"If we don't get this kit out right away then both of them will die!" Eagleclaw roared, silencing Mousetail. "Ravenfur, you can *do* this. Just breathe, we will get this kit out safely." Moonwhisker cleared her mind, trying to work through all the yelling. She ignored the sharp scent of blood on the air, she focused her mind solely on the kit.

She placed both paws gently around the tiny kit and began to pull downwards. She could faintly hear Eagleclaw instructing Ravenfur to push the kit out. There was some hesitation, but at long last the kit came free. Moonwhisker desperately nipped the sac and began

rapidly licking the little kit. It took longer than the others, but eventually the kit started crying.

Moonwhisker breathed a sigh of relief and all four kits were placed at their mother's belly. "Good job." Eagleclaw praised.

"Ravenfur did all the real work." Moonwhisker mewed and looked at the queen while Eagleclaw stopped the bleeding. Ravenfur was shaking from the ordeal, but her eyes were bright as she looked at her four kits.

"Aren't they just the sweetest?" Ravenfur purred, her voice strained.

"They are." Mousetail nuzzled his mate. "You did such a good job, I'm so proud of you."

"The bleeding has stopped." Eagleclaw mewed. "We'll bring some boarage soon, it's going to take a lot to keep those four kits fed."

"Thank you so much, you two." Ravenfur dipped her head.

"It's what we do." Eagleclaw bowed his head and even though he seemed to be stoic, Moonwhisker knew that he had a soft spot for newborn kits.

"It's our pleasure." Moonwhisker purred. "Welcome to AshClan, little kits." She looked at them, all frantically pawing for milk. Even the last one seemed to have all the strength of his siblings. *They'll all make great warriors.* Moonwhisker and Eagleclaw gathered the last of their herbs and left the nursery, giving the new mother time with her kits.

"You did a great job." Eagleclaw praised. "You always seem to handle those situations so well."

"I just cleared my mind." Moonwhisker replied. "That kit needed me, so I focused on him and him alone."

"Well now he's here and there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with him. A little small, but he didn't show any other signs of delay. We'll have to keep an eye on him though."

Moonwhisker nodded and looked towards the nursery. She felt warmed by the birth of new kits, AshClan would be as strong as ever with four new kits. *Our future is secure with those kits.* She then thought about her sisters. *As long as I can set Riverstorm back on the right path.*

Chapter 22

Echoheart walked away from the gathering hollow, exhaustion weighing heavy on her shoulders. She drug her paws and glanced up at the slowly rising sun. *I was out way too long.* Both her and Cedarclaw had fallen asleep together under the stars, though it hadn't been enough sleep to help with Echoheart's already poor sleeping habits. She hoped that her Clanmates wouldn't notice.

As she stepped into the camp, she was immediately spotted by Berryfrost. "Echoheart?" The she-cat mewed. "What are you doing up so early? You look exhausted."

"Couldn't sleep last night." Echoheart replied with a heavy yawn. "I woke up a little bit ago and wanted to get some fresh-air. The warrior's den is just so crowded."

"I understand that." Berryleaf nodded slowly. "Maybe ask your sister or Eagleclaw for some herbs to help you sleep." She suggested. "You don't look the best, no offense."

"None taken." Echoheart assured her. "And I'll ask Moonwhisker later." She probably wouldn't ask her sister, because even though Echoheart was exhausted, she was incredibly happy. Getting to see Cedarclaw almost every night filled her with so much joy.

They had been seeing each other for about six moons now, Echoheart was deeply in love with the tom but she was starting to catch doubts. Cedarclaw told Echoheart how much she meant to him, but he never said I love you and he didn't seem to have the same desire to live in a Clan with Echoheart or have kits.

Why can't he see that the best way for us to be together is to join the same Clan? Echoheart pleaded silently every night, praying to StarClan that he would ask her to come home with him. She could have an entirely knew life in MoonClan. She would miss the pine trees, and she would have to learn how to swim and hunt in an open more but she was willing to do anything for him.

"Echoheart! Berryleaf!" Echoheart heard the call of Ivyheart as the deputy stood before Goldenstar's den. "If you two are done standing around chatting join the dawn patrol." *Figures.* Echoheart really just wanted her den, but that would have to wait. Berryleaf and Echoheart met up before Ivyheart and were joined by Cloverstrike, Leafpaw, Scorchlight and to Echoheart's dismay, Riverstorm. Luckily, the patrol was being led by Scorchlight and *not* her sister. *She can't boss me around.*

"Let's get going." Scorchlight announced and began leading the patrol into the pine trees. The weather was nice, the early morning air was slightly chilly but it still felt nice. Greenleaf was slowly coming to a close, and it seemed to have gone by so fast. Though it had been one of the best greenleaf's of her life. Meeting with Cedarclaw while draining, was the best part of Echoheart's day.

The patrol walked through the pine trees, Echoheart could hear the birds overhead starting to call. Her stomach started to growl, she hadn't eaten since the night before but it would have to wait until she got back to camp. They reached the SunClan border where Scorchlight marked the border.

The patrol was fairly quiet, the only conversations to be had was Cloverstrike teaching some things to Leafpaw as they moved through the trees. Echoheart drowned the conversation out, looking towards the gathering hollow. She wondered if Cedarclaw was sleeping now, or if he had to go on patrol too.

From what Cedarclaw had told her, Cloudstar wasn't like Goldenstar, but she was determined to get revenge on LichenClan for the death of Blacksky, a MoonClan warrior. Cedarclaw feared what the battle would do to his Clan, but he never spoke up against Cloudstar. *I supposed Cloudstar isn't that different from Goldenstar after all.* Echoheart thought about her own leader. *SunClan didn't punish us for the death of Stonewhisker, but if AshClan had lost a warrior I'm sure Goldenstar would start a war.* Echoheart shuddered at the thought.

"Echoheart!" Scorchlight hissed, pulling Echoheart out of her thoughts. Her pelt burned as she realized the entire patrol was staring at her. "Done daydreaming?"

"Sorry." Echoheart dropped her head. "I'm just tired, what did you need?"

"I was asking you if you wanted to join the hunting patrol with me but I guess not."

Echoheart caught Riverstorm narrowing her eyes. "Why so tired, Echoheart?" She questioned.

"Can't sleep." Echoheart replied curtly, not in the mood to talk to her sister. "Can we keep going?" She pressed and Scorchlight agreed, guiding the patrol back in the direction of camp. They were near camp when Echoheart heard Riverstorm muttering something to Cloverstrike, all she caught was her own name. "Something to say, Riverstorm?" Echoheart snapped, facing her sister as anger sparked inside of her.

Riverstorm stopped and lashed her tail. "Maybe you should mind your own business."

"Maybe you shouldn't gossip like an apprentice when I'm standing right here." She growled. "If you have something to say, then say it."

"Is now really the time for this?" Scorchlight spoke up, tail twitching in irritation.

"Echoheart seems to think it is." Riverstorm stepped forward. "And since you're dying to know, I was telling Cloverstrike how embarrassing it is to have a sister who can't even pay attention on a simple border patrol."

"Oh you think I'm embarrassing?" Echoheart spat. "How do you think it feels having a sister who started a fight that got a SunClan warrior killed?"

"At least I did something about it." Riverstorm flexed her claws. "You would've just ran the other way."

"It's clear you two have a lot to talk about." Scorchlight raised his voice. "So why don't you two stay out here and discuss it. The rest of you can come back." Scorchlight led the remaining patrol away, leaving Riverstorm and Echoheart alone together.

"I'm so sick of you acting like your so much better than me." Echoheart raised her voice. "You act like you were paw chosen by StarClan to be the greatest AshClan warrior when in reality your just an arrogant, reckless and *stupid* warrior."

"Oh please, Echoheart." Riverstorm's eyes glinted with amusement. "You've always been jealous at how much better I am than you. I am a better fighter, a better hunter, and just all around better at everything. You've always been stuck behind me and you *always* will be."

Echoheart felt rage burning deep inside of her, for a moment she felt the desire to rake her claws across Riverstorm's pelt. The thought was alarming, but she held back. "Jealous? What is there to be jealous of? The fact that you'll die before me? That you only have friends because they think you're cool but when they eventually grow up they'll realize your just an idiot."

"Tell me how it feels Echoheart, tell me how it feels that when I die I'll be remembered as a fierce, brave, AshClan warrior but when you die everyone will simply forget about you. No one cares about you, Echoheart. Not a single cat in this forest, because you can't do anything right."

"You're wrong!" Echoheart hissed, extending her claws. It was taking every single part of her to not rip her claws into Riverstorm. "I don't know why you've always hated me, but I'm sick of it!" She bared her teeth. "I'm sick of this abuse and I'm sick of *you*!" Her claws ripped at the earth. "I hate you, Riverstorm! I wish I had never been born along side you! I'd rather die then ever call you my sister again!"

Unable to contain herself anymore, Echoheart whipped around and sprinted into the forest. She didn't know where she was going, but she couldn't stomach looking at Riverstorm anymore. *How could she say such things about me?* As she ran through the forest, Echoheart's paw caught on a large stone and she stumbled forward.

Pain shot through her leg and pine needles and stones dug into her pelt. She came to a stop but didn't get to her paws. She closed her eyes and lay helplessly on the forest floor. Her heart aching and her

mind spinning. Riverstorm's words had cut into her deeper than her claws ever could.

No one care about you, Echoheart. Not a single cat in this forest, because you can't do anything right. Echoheart let out a small whimper. *That's not true.* She thought about Cedarclaw. *He cares about me, right?* Echoheart honestly didn't know if she could answer that.

Echoheart lifted her head. *What if I just left right now?* She questioned. *Would anyone care?* She glanced at her paws and another thought troubled her. She had such a strong urge to hurt Riverstorm.

She deserves it. Echoheart thought bitterly, but felt worried by her own thoughts. *What if I actually had attacked her?* Echoheart wondered, imagining herself attacking Riverstorm. Ripping through her pelt and wounding her. *Would it have made me feel better?* Echoheart sighed, realizing that the answer would have been yes.

Chapter 23

Echoheart watched her reflection in the surface of the slowly flowing river. Her heart was a storm of emotions. The fight with Riverstorm dug into her pelt like claws, ripping her apart. She hated her sister for saying things, but her emotions were deeply conflicting. *Riverstorm is my sister, I'm supposed to love her.* Echoheart reminded herself. *I love Moonwhisker, but Riverstorm..?* Thoughts of Riverstorm only filled with Echoheart with feelings of rage and pain. *Do I hate her? Or am I just mad?*

Echoheart flexed her claws, what had truly scared her was her desire to hurt Riverstorm during their argument. She had wanted so badly to hurt her sister, she wanted to feel her claws ripping through her pelt, blood spraying-- *Stop!* Echoheart swung her head, shoving the thoughts away. "I would never hurt Riverstorm." Echoheart told herself, the taste of doubt bitter on her tongue. "I would *never* hurt Riverstorm." She repeated several times. She stared at her paws, struggling to take some calming breaths.

She closed her eyes, listening to the sounds of the forest. She could hear the sound of the gently rushing water, as well as the chirping of birds overhead. She breathed in the scent of pine, a scent that was becoming so foreign to her. With each passing day it was becoming harder and harder to call the pine trees of AshClan her home.

Maybe Riverstorm is right. No one will remember me, maybe that's all the reason I need to leave. She lifted opened her eyes slowly, casting out her green gaze towards MoonClan. *Would they welcome me?* She wondered. She would no longer have to live in the shadow of her sisters, maybe she could finally be her own cat.

In this moment, Echoheart's paws itched to run, to leave AshClan territory and never look back. Even if MoonClan didn't welcome her, she could live as a rouge or loner. *I could forget AshClan, I could forget all the struggles I've faced. I could leave it all behind.*

Echoheart's heart started to pound, her paws burning to get moving. *Just take the first step...*

"Echoheart!" A voice suddenly rang through the trees, pulling Echoheart's mind back to reality. She looked over her shoulder and saw Graypelt padding swiftly through the trees, his amber eyes burning with concern. "There you are, I've been looking for you."

"Why?" Echoheart was shocked at how sharp her tone was. She rose to her paws and turned to face him.

"When the patrol came back I heard about the fight you had with your sister. I wanted to check on you." Graypelt explained.

"I'm fine." Echoheart grumbled. "I lost my cool with Riverstorm, I'm just so sick of her. I'm sick of the way she treats you."

"I don't blame you." Graypelt commented.

"What?" Echoheart met his gaze.

"Unlike the others, I'm not fooled by Riverstorm. She's reckless and arrogant, she walks about like she owns the entire forest. I don't like it, she got a SunClan warrior killed. What if it had been an AshClan warrior that died?"

Echoheart lowered her head slowly, letting out a weak chuckle. "Glad to see that someone in this Clan doesn't think pride and arrogance is what makes a warrior great."

"I've always thought you were a better warrior, Echoheart." Graypelt's tone grew softer. "You've always been better than her."

Echoheart's eyes went wide slightly. "You did?"

Graypelt nodded slowly, taking a step forward. "You're so caring, you care about the wellbeing of your Clanmates over your own, that's what makes a good warrior. I wouldn't mind seeing you lead the Clan someday."

"I don't think being leader is in my future." Echoheart admitted. "It's not a life I've ever wanted, I just want to be a good warrior."

"Then mission accomplished." Graypelt chuckled. "You know," He cleared his throat, looking around sheepishly. "I've always....admired you Echoheart. You're an incredible warrior, and I truly care about you." Echoheart's pelt started to burn as she watched this tom confess his feelings for her.

"Graypelt I--" Echoheart stammered, stumbling with her words. "Graypelt...you're sweet, you really are." Her voice was low, trembling slightly. Graypelt was a genuinely good cat with a good heart, he saw through Riverstorm's arrogance and looked out for his Clanmates, maybe if Echoheart had never met Cedarclaw...but her heart already belonged to the MoonClan tom. She lowered her head shamefully. "I'm sorry, Graypelt, but I do not feel the same way as you."

There was a long, painful moment of silence, the only sound being the chirping of birds. Echoheart wasn't sure it was her place to speak, she didn't want to hurt Graypelt, but she couldn't lie to him. After what seemed like an eternity, Graypelt finally breathed out a sigh. "That's alright," He said, clear pain in his voice. "I understand, Echoheart." He let out a chuckle, Echoheart could tell it was forced. "What matters is you right now, it was stupid of me to confess like that."

"No, Graypelt--"

He lifted his tail to quiet her, shaking his head. "Don't worry about it, Echoheart. I came out here to talk to you about your sister."

The situation was becoming incredibly awkward, Echoheart just wanted it to end. She looked over her should at MoonClan territory before shaking her head slowly. "I'm feeling better," She lied. "Why don't we head back to camp?" She suggested nervously.

Graypelt looked back up at her. "Alright, Echoheart." His voice sounded slightly more enthused, but Echoheart could see his pain as clear as day. *I need this moment to end.* She thought briefly before standing up and starting the walk back to camp. She really didn't want to go back to camp, she wanted to leave and never turn back but clearly now wasn't the time. *I'll find my chance to leave soon enough.* She told herself. *I just have to wait.* Echoheart and Graypelt

walked together back to AshClan camp, Echoheart made sure to keep her distance from Graypelt, she didn't want to play with his heart or make his emotions any worse.

The moment they stepped through the entrance, Graypelt dipped his head farewell to Echoheart and padded off to where Lilyclaw was sitting, presumably to get emotional support from his sister. *If only I could do that.* Echoheart thought bitterly. She peered around camp, unable to spot Riverstorm's blue-gray pelt and breathed out a sigh of relief. She looked momentarily at the fresh-kill pile, but she didn't have much of an appetite.

Echoheart decided it may be best for her just to get some sleep for now, she could try and wake up early to meet with Cedarclaw before dawn. She padded through the camp, almost reaching the warrior's den before a voice stopped her. "Echoheart!" She heard the call of Moonwhisker, her sister was trotting over to her. "Can I borrow you for a moment?"

Echoheart wondered was Moonwhisker could possibly need her for, but she always enjoyed spending time with Moonwhisker, the medicine cat was always so busy. "Sure." Echoheart replied and followed her sister to the medicine cat den. It was empty inside, she wondered where Eagleclaw had gone. "What did you need?"

"Oh, I just have a bunch of herbs that need sorting." Moonwhisker replied, but something about her tone seemed off. "I was hoping to have some company while Eagleclaw is out, you don't have to help if you don't want to."

"I don't mind." Echoheart replied, she had helped her sister before and had a basic understanding about herbs.

"Wonderful." Moonwhisker purred and sat down in front of the large pile of herbs. Echoheart sat beside her, starting to sort and organize some of the herbs. It was nice, spending some quiet time with Moonwhisker. It was so much better than spending time with Moonwhisker instead of Riverstorm.

The two of them sat and sorted herbs for a while together before Echoheart heard pawsteps. She assumed it was Eagleclaw, but then

she caught scent of Riverstorm. Her body tensed and her fur stood on end. "Hey, Moonwhisker," Riverstorm spoke as she stepped into the den. "Lionpelt said you wanted to--" She broke off upon seeing Echoheart and her gaze darkened. Echoheart's body went rigid and she flattened her ears, glaring at her sister. "Nevermind." Riverstorm growled and started to turn away.

"Wait!" Moonwhisker cried and jumped to her paws, stopping Riverstorm. "I asked you both to come here because I heard about your fight. You two need to talk about this."

Echoheart felt anger clawing deep inside her stomach again. She stood up and turned away from Riverstorm. "There's nothing to talk about, Moonwhisker." Echoheart said sharply. "I have *nothing* to say to her."

"Like I want to talk to you." Riverstorm grumbled. Echoheart's claws scraped against the floor of the medicine cat den, once agains he felt the urger to claw her sister's pelt. *Ignore her.* Echoheart told herself. *She's not worth it.*

"You two can't keep going like this." Moonwhisker mewed urgently. "You're *sisters*, we're all sisters. We need to support each other."

"How can I support her when she sees me less than crowfood." Echoheart hissed. "Riverstorm has *never* cared about me, and I know she never will."

"Stop being so dramatic, Echoheart." Riverstorm lashed her tail. "You're the one acting like such an apprentice."

Echoheart whirled on Riverstorm, baring her teeth. Riverstorm jumped back slightly, there was a brief flash of alarm in her blue eyes. "*You're* the one who is so unbelievably arrogant and entitled. You think that you are StarClan's gift to the forest and you only care about yourself and your own reputation. If you do end up leading this Clan you'll only lead it down a path of violence and bloodshed. There's more to being a warrior than just fighting! Goldenstar is not the the amazing leader you think she is, and you're no better than her! One of these days you'll start a fight that will get your Clanmates killed!"

Riverstorm glared at Echoheart, a myriad of emotions burning in her eyes. She opened her mouth to speak, but Moonwhisker beat her to it. "She's right, Riverstorm." Moonwhisker's voice was sad. "I understand you want to be a strong warrior, I really do, but so does Echoheart. We all want to serve AshClan the best we can, it'ss fine that you admire and look up to Goldenstar but blindly picking fights isn't the way to do that. All picking pointless battles does is put warrior lives at risk and makes enemies." Riverstorm let out a low growl but didn't respond.

"You two may be night and day from each other, but you're still sisters. You're still family and you always will be. Riverstorm, what if you started a fight that got Echoheart killed? Or me? Medicine cats are not immune from battles."

Echoheart looked up, meeting Riverstorm's gaze. She was glad that Moonwhisker was standing up for her and telling Riverstorm something she needed to hear, but it didn't make Echoheart feel any better. There was a bitter feeling of resentment on her tongue, she couldn't help but feel that her relationship with Riverstorm was already shattered beyond repair. However, Echoheart still loved Moonwhisker. She could see that Riverstorm was feeling the exact same way. They may not ever be able to repair their relationship, they would never truly be "sisters" but they could pretend to be so, they could pretend to get along, only for Moonwhisker.

"I'll...keep that in mind." Riverstorm said quietly. "Sorry." She muttered to Echoheart, but there was no meaning behind her words.

"Me too." Echoheart responded with the same tone.

Moonwhisker breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you two," She looked from Riverstorm to Echoheart. "See? That wasn't so hard. You two can go now, if you want to keep helping me Echoheart, you can."

Echoheart nodded, watching Riverstorm leave. As her sister left, Echoheart got another thought in her mind. She thought back to what Moonwhisker said. *Riverstorm, what if you started a fight that got Echoheart killed?* Echoheart felt a coldness in her chest, she wasn't sure that Riverstorm *would* care, and if it was the other way

around, would Echoheart care if Riverstorm died? The truth was scary, but the truth was that she wouldn't.

Chapter 24

Riverstorm arose from her nest, letting out a heavy yawn. She glanced around the warriors den, seeing that most of her Clanmates were still in their nests with the exception of Mousetail who was sitting guard and Echoheart. Riverstorm briefly wondered where her sister had gone, but quickly realized she didn't care. What Echoheart did was none of Riverstorm's concern.

Two moons had passed since she had her fight with Echoheart and while they had come to the silent agreement to attempt to get along for the sake of Moonwhisker. This had resulted in the two of them becoming nothing more than Clanmates to each other. They would sometimes patrol together, hunt together but that was about it. Riverstorm had no interest in reforming her relationship with Echoheart, it was already gone.

Riverstorm shoved away the thoughts of her sister away and stepped out into the camp. Leaf-fall had arrived in the forest and with it brought the bitter cold mornings that Riverstorm hated. Frosty air bit at her ear tips and it was a sour reminder that leafbare wasn't far off. Riverstorm thought back to the last leafbare, she had still been just an apprentice but sickness had claimed one of Goldenstar's lives, as well as the life of Tawnyfrost. AshClan was lucky to have not faced more loss, she recalled that SunClan had lost a warrior and two kits.

Riverstorm glanced over at the nursery which was currently full of excitable kits. *StarClan please let the sickness stay away from them.* She did her best to ignore the thoughts of kits getting sick, she knew that both Eagleclaw and Moonwhisker were incredibly skilled medicine cats and would keep the Clan healthy. *But then there's Goldenstar.* The sensation of fear crept into Riverstorm's chest. *She only has two lives left. What if she gets sick and loses another one?* Her tail twitched with anxiety, what would AshClan do without Goldenstar?

She tried to imagine AshClan being led by Ivyheart, the deputy was

skilled and brave but could she even compare to Goldenstar? Goldenstar was the greatest leader in the forest, she led AshClan without fear, they were a respected and revered Clan. Riverstorm didn't care what other cats said about Goldenstar, she was the reason AshClan was so strong.

Riverstorm knew that someday Goldenstar would join StarClan, this wasn't something that could be changed, but Riverstorm wanted to make sure that AshClan would be led with her ideals, its what would keep AshClan strong. *If only I could be leader.* Riverstorm thought. If Riverstorm was able to succeed Goldenstar then she would lead AshClan the same way that Goldenstar did, she would keep AshClan strong.

If Ivyheart became leader however, her leadership could span generations and Riverstorm may never get a chance. Riverstorm shook her head slowly, she shouldn't be so focused on this. Goldenstar still had two lives left, those lives could last a long time. *Ivyheart's getting older, she could retire during that time, and I know Goldenstar trusts me enough to make me deputy.* She once again turned her attention to the nursery. *But I need an apprentice.* She really wanted to mentor either Rosekit and Blossomkit, they were Goldenstar's kin after all, the daughters of Lionpelt. She would raise one of them into a fine warrior. She wouldn't mind mentoring one of Ravenfur's kits, she would just have to wait longer.

"Good morning, Riverstorm." The voice of Ivyheart broke Riverstorm's thoughts, she turned away from the nsery and glanced towards the gray tabby who stepped out of the warrior's den. "Since you're up why don't you lead the dawn patrol? Take Gorsestrike, Petalpaw, Windheart and Graywillow with you."

"Sure thing." Riverstorm dipped her head respectfully and turned back into the warriors den. She woke each of the assigned warriors and waited for them to wake up and get prepared while Gorsestrike woke Petalpaw.

Once they were all gathered, Riverstorm led the patrol out into the chilly forest. As they padded through the pine trees, Riverstorm kept her senses on high alert. Behind her, Graywillow let out a yawn. "I think I'm getting too old for this kind of weather." She

complained. "I think I see the elders den in my future."

"You're not that old, Graywillow." Petalpaw chirped, looking at the she-cat. While Riverstorm didn't think that Graywillow was that old, she could see strands of white starting to show around her muzzle.

"I was already starting to get old when I gave birth to Windheart and Rainsong. Seeing how old you and Leafpaw are getting makes me feel even older! It's a shame it took me so long to have kits."

"Why did it take so long?" Petalpaw asked curiously.

"It's not always quick for some she-cats. It didn't take Rainsong long at all, but I was mates with Silverstripe for many moons before I had my own. Every she-cat is different."

"I see." Petalpaw's mind clearly drifted off in thought. Riverstorm once again thought back to her thoughts about Ivyheart. *Ivyheart is Graywillow's sister, if Graywillow is considering retirement then Ivyheart might start thinking about it soon too, but not before I've trained an apprentice. I need to talk to Goldenstar about mentoring Rosekit or Blossomkit.* She made a mental note to talk to Goldenstar before continuing the patrol.

The patrol went without issue and before long, they returned to camp. Riverstorm helped herself to a nice mouse to warm her up and fill her appetite. As she finished her breakfast, she spotted Goldenstar speaking to Ivyheart outside her den. She glanced over at Riverstorm and beckoned her over. Riverstorm discarded the remains of her mouse and swiftly padded over to the leader.

"Did you need something, Goldenstar?" She questioned.

"Yes." Goldenstar replied with a small nod. "I wish to have a meeting with some of my senior warriors."

Riverstorm blinked in confusion. "I'm not a senior warrior."

"No, but you are a warrior that I trust." Goldenstar's eyes glowed and Riverstorm felt warmth in her chest. A few moments later Riverstorm spotted Jayclaw approaching with Dustclaw, Cinderflower and Gorsestrike. "Thank you, Jayclaw." Goldenstar

dipped her head. "Follow me and we'll begin."

Goldenstar led the group of cats into her den and they all sat down before her. Riverstorm had no idea what was going on, but she was excited. She noticed Jayclaw giving her a brief look of approval before Goldenstar started speaking. "As you all are aware, leafbare is rapidly approaching. The last leafbare was incredibly difficult for the other Clans, with the exception of us. We struggled yes, but we were never out of prey. We had illness, but only two lives were lost, Tawnyfrost and one of mine. The loss of Tawnyfrost was tragic, but compared to the other three Clans I think we came out on top."

Riverstorm could see that the other cats were listening with interest, but she wondered exactly where Goldenstar was going with this. "I attribute this to the dedication of our warriors, AshClan cats live their lives with a certain drive and loyalty to their Clan, it is one of my greatest prides. Not to mention our skillful medicine cats who keep our cats healthy during the worst of seasons. I cannot say the same for the other Clans, and this is where my fear comes into play."

Riverstorm leaned forward, curious as to what she was going to say next. "I fear that the other Clans will see our ability to thrive during such harsh seasons as a threat, or as an opportunity to take from us. I fear that they will attack us and try and take our prey or herbs, I need to make sure that this doesn't happen."

"What are you suggesting?" Gorsestrike spoke up.

"We lead an assault on one of the Clans, to show them that AshClan will not accept any threats or action taken against us. I'm not trying to cause any damage, but to send a message. Once my message has been delivered then we will leave and the Clan will spread the news to the other two."

Makes sense to me. Riverstorm thought. *AshClan needs to flex our strength and power, to show the other Clans that they can never take from us. If they try, they'll lose.*

"Which Clan did you plan on attacking?" Jayclaw questioned. "SunClan or LichenClan?"

"Neither, we are going to lead this attack against MoonClan." Goldenstar explained.

"But we don't even share a border with them." Cinderflower pointed out. "What's the point?"

"MoonClan struggled the most during last leaf-bare, not to mention whatever conflict they have going on with LichenClan. Birdstar would never think of leading an assault on us, but I refuse to trust Cloudstar, she is clearly determined to regain MoonClan's former glory. MoonClan cats always pride themselves on being peaceful and yet she's been waging war against LichenClan for many moons now. She wants to show the Clans that MoonClan is strong just as I do, but I will not let her tread on my territory.

"I believe attacking MoonClan will convey my message perfectly. The other Clans will understand that AshClan is not a force they want to reckon with." Goldenstar's green eyes scanned the small group of warriors. "Does anyone object to this idea?" There was moment of silence, but none of the warriors spoke up. "Then it is decided." Goldenstar rose to her paws. "I am going to announce to the Clan, and then tomorrow we will lead our attack."

The meeting was dismissed and the cats started to disperse, before Goldenstar was able to leave Riverstorm stopped her. "One moment, Goldenstar." Riverstorm spoke up, the leader looked at her with interest.

"Did you need something?"

"Yes," Riverstorm confirmed. "I want to talk about me getting an apprentice, I feel like its been long enough and I want to mentor one of Rainsong's kits."

Goldenstar's eyes softened with amusement. "I admired your ambition, Riverstorm. I have already chosen mentors for Rosekit and Blossomkit, but do not worry. You will be mentoring one of Ravenfur's kits for sure. You just need to wait a bit longer."

Riverstorm felt a twinge of disappointment, but knowing that for certain she would be mentoring one of Ravenfur's four kits. "I

understand, Goldenstar." She bowed her head. "Thank you." Goldenstar dipped her head in return before stepping out into the Clan. It didn't take long before she raised her voice.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!" Goldenstar's bold voice rang out loudly across camp, getting the attention of the rest of AshClan. Riverstorm sat down beside Jayclaw, waiting for the rest of the Clan to gather. Once the Clan was ready, Goldenstar started to speak. She relayed the same speech that she had given to the senior warriors. Once she finished, she allowed the Clan a few moments to process things.

Most of AshClan seemed to agree with Goldenstar's ideas, but there was a select group of cats that didn't seem too thrilled. Riverstorm wasn't surprised at all to see that one of them was Echoheart, a very visible shadow of doubt and fear crossed her face. *What is she so worried about?* The other cats who seemed to doubt Goldenstar were Ripplestep, which wasn't surprising since he was Echoheart's mentor, Lionpelt, Graypelt, Hollytail and Heatherstorm.

"Are we sure this is such a good idea, Goldenstar?" Ripplestep was the first to speak up. "As you said, leafbare is dangerously close and we shouldn't be wasting our strength and resources."

"I appreciate your concern, Ripplestep." Goldenstar waved her tail dismissively. "But as I said, this will not be an intensive battle. Simply a way to send a message to MoonClan, it won't be a long battle."

"But MoonClan hasn't done anything to us," Echoheart spoke up, her voice cracking slightly, Riverstorm narrowed he eyes.

"Not yet," Goldenstar spoke, setting her gaze intently on Echoheart. "And once we're done, they never will."

"But--"

"Silence, Echoheart." Beside Riverstorm, Jayclaw raised his voice. Their father glared intensely at Echoheart who flattened her ears. "Do not question your leader, I figured you would at least be able to understand *that*." Riverstorm saw embarrassment fill her sister's eyes

and Echoheart ducked her head, sitting back down. She could see pain written across her face and she almost felt bad. *But Jayclaw is right, it isn't Echoheart's place to question Goldenstar.*

"There's no need for that, Jayclaw." Goldenstar raised her tail. "Every cat in my Clan has a right to speak their minds," She looked over the cats of AshClan. "I understand that some of you may not think this fight is the right way, but I ask that you all put your faith in me. I am not asking you to kill, I just want to send a message. Put your faith in me, as your leader, and AshClan will remain strong."

Her words seemed to soothe just about every cat except for Echoheart, she stared at her paws, a storm brewing in her eyes. Riverstorm wondered just what was bothering her so much but Riverstorm knew that it would be pointless to ask. *Whatever it is, it doesn't matter.* She glanced up towards Goldenstar who was answering a question from Hollytail. *I have to give my all in this fight, for AshClan and for Goldenstar.*

Chapter 25

Echoheart stared at her paws, dread and doubts flooding her chest. *This can't be happening. How can we fight MoonClan?* Her heart twisted at the thought of facing Cedarclaw in battle. *I can't bring myself to hurt him, and I know he wouldn't be able to hurt me either.* She took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing nerves but she wasn't sure she could. *Maybe I should warn him.* Echoheart thought, wondering if she should sneak out and warn Cedarclaw of Goldenstar's plan.

But if Goldenstar found out... Echoheart shuddered to think what would happen if any of her Clanmates caught her telling Cedarclaw about AshClan plans. She would be exiled for sure, but would that really matter to her? She wanted to leave AshClan anyway, maybe this would be the best way? Surely Echoheart warning Cedarclaw about the attack would prove her dedication to him, would MoonClan thank her by welcoming her into the Clan?

The idea was appealing to her, Echoheart *had* to do something. She lifted her head slowly, looking at Goldenstar who was speaking with Ivyheart, Jayclaw and Riverstorm. Anger bubbled in her chest, her claws digging into the earth beneath them. *To ruin her plan...*Echoheart thought. *To be free of all of them forever.* Echoheart lifted her head more, taking a deep breath. It was decided, she would sneak out to see Cedarclaw and warn him of Goldenstar's attack.

She would play along for now, she would actively listen to Goldenstar's plan so she could relay everything to MoonClan, she would tell Cedarclaw everything and MoonClan would be able to successfully counter attack, shutting Goldenstar's stupid plan down. If Echoheart wasn't caught by someone, then after the attack she would come forward about what she did. She would tell Cloudstar what she did for her Clan, then would request to join MoonClan. *It has to work.* Echoheart told herself, she had to believe in herself for this plan.

Echoheart listened to the plan, learning that Goldenstar was planning on having Ivyheart lead the main patrol. They would cross the river into MoonClan territory and wait for their night patrol to show up where they would be ambushed. They would purposefully allow a cat to escape and bring reinforcements in which two more patrols led by Riverstorm and Jayclaw would join the fight as well. Once Goldenstar was satisfied with their attack, she would make her point to Cloudstar and AshClan would retreat.

Echoheart had been assigned to her sister's patrol, she would rather be on Ivyheart's but it was better than Jayclaw's. She bitterly remembered the way her father had spoken to her during the Clan meeting. She shook the feeling away, not allowing herself to dwell on that moment. *I need to focus.*

Once Echoheart had learned just about everything she could, she started preparing to leave. She just had to hope that Cedarclaw wold be there waiting for her tonight. He couldn't come every night, but most nights he was. Echoheart had to wait patiently and nervously for her Clan to settle down for the night, the attack would be taking place the following night so the Clan had plenty of time to rest and prepare. *I have once chance to do this.*

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Echoheart rose from her nest, being more cautious than ever. She carefully stepped over each of her Clanmates until she stepped out into the brisk evening air. The moon was just under half-full, shedding faint light on AshClan's camp. In the distance, Duskwhisker was sitting guard, the moonlight reflecting off her cream-colored coat as she faced the camp's entrance.

Sneaking out of camp had become second nature to Echoheart, she snuck close to the warrior's den and crept around the back end of it. Her paws were silent and soft, careful not disturb any stones or pine needles. Once she was safely away from camp, she broke into a sprint towards the gathering hollow. She crossed the river with ease, her heart pounding painfully in her chest. Her green eyes scanned the gathering hollow, unable to spot Cedarclaw's golden-brown fur. *No, no, no.* Echoheart felt panic start to set in.

She sat down in their usual meeting spot, her tail twitching anxiously. He was usually here before her, but she *did* come early. She would just have to wait. *He has to be here soon. He has to.*

Echoheart sat in the gathering hollow for painfully long, waiting for Cedarclaw to show up but the wind only carried scents of moor from MoonClan territory. *I have to tell him. I have to.* Echoheart rose to her paws and started towards MoonClan territory. It didn't take long for her to reach the MoonClan river border in the gathering hollow. She knew that MoonClan cats usually swam across to reach the gathering hollow, but Echoheart really didn't feel like swimming.

She scoured the riverbank looking for any signs of a branch of stones to cross. The only ones she saw, however, was a large branch that crossed from SunClan territory into MoonClan territory. *I'll be in SunClan territory for just a moment.* Echoheart knew that she couldn't just waltz into both territories and leave her scent. She found a patch of lavender, she knew it had a strong scent so she rolled in it to cover her own.

Echoheart used the stepping stones to cross into SunClan territory, then rushed over to the branch to cross into MoonClan territory. She was only in SunClan territory for a very short amount of time. Once she was in MoonClan territory she breathed a sigh of relief. Cedarclaw had explained a lot of his territory to her, and she knew the general direction to head to find MoonClan's camp.

She assumed that if Cedarclaw hadn't showed up that he was keeping guard, if she could get his attention then she could warn him and return to AshClan camp by dawn. She crept through the moorland, she did know that MoonClan cats enjoyed hunting at night and she would have to keep her guard up. *He could also be hunting.* Echoheart thought. She followed the scent of MoonClan as it grew stronger and stronger, she had to be getting close.

"This is my second night in a row doing night hunting," A sudden voice in the darkness made Echoheart nearly jump out of her pelt. She looked around in a panic, looking for somewhere to hide. MoonClan's territory was so barren that it might be a struggle. *StarClan help me!* Echoheart did her best to keep her distance from

the hunting patrol, she still couldn't see them but their scents were growing stronger.

At long last, Echoheart found a large patch of heather. She got as deep into the plant as she could to hide herself. It didn't take long fro the patrol to arrive. They didn't seem to be aware of her prescance at all. As the patrol stepped into view, she scanned them to try and see if Cedarclaw was among them. Of the cats she recognized she spotted Smokeleaf and Windsong, as well as a younger dark gray tom and a gray she-cat. *But no Cedarclaw.* She thought with a flick of her tail.

She stayed in the heather patch for as long as she could util the patrol was long gone. Once she felt safe, she broke free from the heather and continued on her path towards MoonClan camp. In the distance she finally spotted a cluster of trees. Cedarclaw had told her that MoonClan's camp as a deep hollow protected by trees. Echoheart crept closer, now convinced that she had finally found the camp.

Most times, MoonClan cats would sleep in the open air but tonight was cold, surely they would all be tucked away safely in their nests. She scanned the camp and found the cat sitting guard, but it was not Cedarclaw, it was Snakepelt. *Fox-dung!* She cursed. *Then why didn't he come?* Echoheart pondered. She shook her head, she had no way of warning him now. The sun would be coming up soon and she was running out of options.

She could burst into MoonClan camp and warn everyone about the fight, but why would MoonClan have any reason to trust her? She had no doubt in her mind that she would escorted back to AshClan territory, the other Clans didn't trust AshClan, and Echoheart really couldn't blame them.

Echoheart breathed out a sigh, she had no more options. She would have to return to her own camp and partake in the fight. *But I don't have to fight Cedarclaw.* She would do everything she could do avoid fighting him. *Surely he won't blame me for this fight, right?*

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Echoheart returned to camp just before dawn, her legs aching and feeling absolutely exhausted. She didn't want to spend her night running across the entire forest and she felt even worse knowing that it had been for nothing. She made sure to roll around in pine needles near the border to make sure she reclaimed her AshClan scent back. She had returned smelling like heather and lavender, every cat would've known where she had been.

Echoheart managed to slip back into the warrior's den and hoped to get at least some sleep before the rest of the Clan woke her up. Echoheart curled up into her nest and it didn't take long at all for sleep to take her.

Echoheart's sleep, however, was restless. She didn't feel like she had fully fallen asleep as was all too aware of everything going on around her. She could hear her Clanmates getting up and talking, but when she opened her eyes it was almost sunhigh. She still felt exhausted, but the sleep would have to be enough for now.

She stepped out of the warrior's den and looked around, the cats of AshClan were hyping themselves up for the fight. They were sparring and practicing their battle skills while Eagleclaw and Moonwhisker prepared herbs for any wounds. Echoheart sighed, her plan had failed. *As long as Goldenstar keeps to her promise, this shouldn't be a violent fight.* Echoheart glanced up towards the sky, trying to ignore the fear that clawed a her heart. *StarClan please. Let this fight go smoothly.*

Chapter 26

"Cats of AshClan!" Goldenstar's voice rang out overhead, getting the attention of the Clan. Echoheart looked up from the mouse she had been pecking at, fear rushing into her chest. "It's nearly time for our assault." She glanced up at the sky, it was just past sunset and night wasn't far off. "If you haven't, please go to Moonwhisker and Eagleclaw for some strengthening herbs. We want to make sure we're at our absolute bests."

Right. Echoheart thought regretfully and she forced herself to her paws, forcing down the rest of her mouse. Feeling as if there were stones in her belly, Echoheart padded slowly over to the medicine cat den. Moonwhisker looked up as she approached. "Welcome, Echoheart." She politely bowed her head. "Here for your herbs."

"Yeah." Echoheart replied, her throat feeling dried. As Moonwhisker gathered together her herbs, she glanced over at Eagleclaw who seemed to be sulking. She knew that he medicine cat hated pointless battles, and Echoheart felt inclined to agree. *Too bad we can't go against Goldenstar.* She thought with a snort.

"Here you go." Moonwhisker purred, nudging forward some herbs. "Burnet, chamomile and ragweed. These herbs will give you strength and energy."

"Thank you, Moonwhisker." Echoheart mewed softly and lowered her head to quickly eat the herbs. She wrinkled her nose at the bitter taste but accepted them before meeting with her patrol. Riverstorm stood at the head of it, double checking to see which cats were already grouped. She met Echoheart's eyes for a brief moment before giving a small nod and continuing.

Since she and Riverstorm had reduced their relationship to essentially nothing more than Clanmates, things *had* gotten better between them in the sense that they barely spoke or interacted with each other. Also part of this patrol was Hazelfern, Robinflight, Graywillow, Duskwhisker, Dustclaw Dustclaw and Lilyclaw.

AshClan was a very large Clan, but not every warrior was joining the fight.

Goldenstar had decided that Sharptongue, Mousetail, Berryleaf, Roseclaw, Mudthorn and Petalpaw would be staying behind as to not leave AshClan camp without defense. Goldenstar herself had joined Jayclaw's battle patrol, which was about the same size as Riverstorm's. The smallest patrol was the initial patrol of Ivyheart's. It addition to the deputy, it contain Cloverstrike, Leafpaw, Cinderflower, Mistypool, Scorchlight and Ripplestep.

Goldenstar had explained the plan over and over, but Echoheart only had to focus on her patrol's plan. They would wait in the shadows until MoonClan reinforcements arrived, then Riverstorm would charge in to swarm the MoonClan cats, and Jayclaw's patrol would enter last. Once the fight started, Echoheart would do everything she could to keep her distance from Cedarclaw. *I can do this. This fight won't last long.*

She took a deep breath, watching as Goldenstar gave Ivyheart the signal to leave with her patrol first. Echoheart watched her Clanmates vanish into the pine trees and once they had been given enough time to leave the area, Riverstorm led her patrol into the territory as well. Echoheart did her best to ignore the fear in her heart, all she had to do was focus on the fight. Around her, her patrol mates seemed to be excited, their eyes burning with anticipation. *Why do they all have to be so battle hungry?* She thought, she at least wished that she had Graypelt or Ripplestep in her patrol, some of the few AshClan cats weren't so driven to fight.

They followed Ivyheart's scent trail towards the gathering hollow, a path that Echoheart was all too familiar with. Even just last night she had been into MoonClan territory, albeit for a useless mission. The weight of her failures still pressed down on her shoulder. *If only Cedarclaw had been there, all of this could have been prevented.* She withheld a pathetic sigh and just walked with her patrol.

With each step towards MoonClan territory as they crossed into the Gathering Hollow, Echoheart felt her heart pounding painfully in her chest. She had a nagging feeling of doubt and fear, she was so worried that something would go terribly wrong with this fight.

What if it ends up just like the SunClan battle and a MoonClan warrior dies? We know that Cloudstar will go to war for her dead Clanmates. Or what if an AshClan cat dies? What if-- She thought about Cedarclaw dying and her heart almost shattered. *No. I can't think like that.* She had to steady her thoughts, she refused to let her fear control her any longer.

"Where are we going to cross the river?" Riverstorm spoke up, questioning Goldenstar.

"We'll briefly cross into SunClan territory, Ivyheart already should've have done this. We'll hide our scents so that MoonClan won't see us coming and SunClan won't know where we came from." *Just as I did.* Echoheart thought, she had the mind of an AshClan cat afterall.

After using various herbs to hide their scents, AshClan crossed into SunClan territory briefly, following the same path that Echoheart had followed the night before. They reached MoonClan territory in no time, and when they did, the moon was high in the sky. *We're fighting MoonClan in their element.* Echoheart noted. *They have the best night vision and they know their open territory.* Echoheart had hated travelling the vast moorland last night. *Are we sure this is such a good idea.*

Despite her worries, Echoheart dare not open her mouth. Riverstorm's patrol stayed in the shelter of the trees that line the river while they waited for Ivyheart's signal. Echoheart scanned the moor for a sign of Ivyheart's patrol, only managing to spot the cream-colored tail of Duskwhisker. It was silent, they were waiting for a patrol.

The wait seemed to go on forever, the silence almost deafening. Echoheart kept her body low to the ground, making sure that MoonClan would never be able to see them coming. Her ears twitched as she heard voices, they belonged to a MoonClan hunting patrol. She spotted the pure white pelt of the warrior Icestorm, she was clearly leading this patrol.

In the blink of an eye, Ivyheart let out a yowl and the patrol attacked. She heard cries of alarm from the MoonClan patrol as

they were quickly overcome with AshClan warriors. "AshClan invaders!" They cry of panic came from a tom named Driftwater. "Dovepaw! Run back to camp and warn the others!" A small pale gray she-cat broke away from the fight and started sprinting towards MoonClan camp. She watched Robinflight give chase, but Echoheart knew that it was all fake. There was no way that an AshClan cat would reasonably keep up with a MoonClan cat, and they wanted more MoonClan cats to arrive. Echoheart watched the fight from afar, she could tell the cats next to her were getting anxious to fight.

Echoheart scanned the MoonClan cats, seeing that Cedarclaw was not with him. *He's not in the fight yet, I have to make sure I avoid him.* She sniffed the air, the scent of MoonClan getting stronger. *They'll be here soon.* "More MoonClan cats incoming." She reported to Riverstorm who responded with a tiny nod.

Cloudstar appeared over a small hill with a horde of MoonClan warriors behind her. "MoonClan! Attack!" Her voice cried out and they began sprinting towards the AshClan patrol. Ivyheart tilted her head back and let out a sharp wail.

"Now!" Riverstorm cried out and their patrol charged forward. Echoheart ran forward as fast as she could with her teeth and claws bared, she looked around swiftly, unable to spot Cedarclaw's pelt. She would fight, but she wouldn't fight him. Instead Echoheart spotted a white spotted she-cat by the name of Frostfire, Echoheart let out a yowl and tackled the she-cat to the ground, she pinned the she-cat down and slashed her claws across Frostfire's shoulders.

Frostfire hissed in return and started squirming underneath Frostfire's grasp, she wriggled and fought but Echoheart had more physical strength and was quite larger than the MoonClan warrior. Echoheart continued to batter the she-cats back, making sure she wouldn't be able to fight back.

Before Echoheart could even react, another cat slammed into Echoheart, throwing her to the side. Echoheart was winded slightly but looked up and saw a silver tabby she-cat charging forward, her eyes ablaze with rage. Echoheart yowled and jumped swiftly to her paws, meeting the MoonClan cat half way. The two she-cats locked

in battle and Echoheart felt herself become over powered.

Her black slammed against the ground, sending pain along her spine. She grit her teeth and pain and sank her claws into the she-cats shoulders, ripping them down her forelegs. The she-cat hissed in pain and her muzzle shot forward, sinking razor sharp teeth into Echoheart's shoulder.

Echoheart tilted her head back, hissing as the burning pain spread through her fur. She quickly realized her legs were free, she pulled her hind legs back and drove her paws deep into the she-cats belly. She let out a gasp and released her grip on Echoheart. She stumbled back and Echoheart quickly recovered, striking forward with the speed of a viper. Her paw struck the she-cats neck and she let out a choking noise and stumbled to the ground.

"Silverpool!" Frostfire cried and padded swiftly over to the gray tabby.

"I'm fine." Silverpool coughed, Echoheart turned away from them, she had easily finished them off. Silverpool would need time to recover and Frostfire's white pelt was already soaked with blood. Echoheart took a moment to assess the battle. She spotted Ivystone wrestling with Mistypool, Echoheart's mother had her pelt lined with small scratches, but Ivystone had blood running down the side of her face. Cinderflower and Cloverstrike were fighting side by side against Ashbird and Smokeleaf. AshClan was clearly winning, and once Goldenstar's patrol arrived, it should be over.

Echoheart went to search for another fight when she was suddenly knocked off her paws by another cat. She rolled head over tail backwards towards the river, taking her away from the fight. Echoheart hissed and jumped to her paws, facing her assailant. She came face to face with Amberfrost, Cedarclaw's sister.

I won't hurt her. Echoheart told herself, but faced the she-cat with hiss. *But I will defend myself.* "I know about you and my brother." Amberfrost spat, Echoheart's blood turned cold and her eyes went wide. "I see the way you look at him." Her green eyes burned with an intense anger.

Echoheart stood her ground. "If you know about us then surely you must know how we feel about each other!" Echoheart tried her best to reason with Amberfrost, she didn't want the love of her life's sister to hate her. "I love your brother! With all of my heart! And I know he loves me too."

Amberfrost let out a mocking laugh, flexing her claws. "Oh don't make me laugh." She hissed. "My brother may be an idiot, but he would *never* love a cat like you."

Anger sparked inside of Echoheart. "You don't know anything about us!" Echoheart spat. "I *know* Cedarclaw loves me, and I love him."

"Amberfrost!" A painfully familiar voice called out, it was Cedarclaw. It didn't take long for Cedarclaw to appear, his eyes going wide when he spotted Echoheart. *He can show Amberfrost, he can show her that we truly do love each other!* "Amberfrost what are you--" Before Cedarclaw could finish his sentence, there was a flash of dark fur and he was tackled, sent rolling down the small hill towards Echoheart and Amberfrost, and his attacker was Riverstorm.

Echoheart watched in horror as Riverstorm's claws tore into her mate. "Riverstorm stop!" Echoheart cried out, running forward towards the two of them. Riverstorm stopped, looking at Echoheart in confusion while Cedarclaw managed to squeeze out from under her.

"Echoheart what in the name of StarClan are you doing? You know he's part of the Clan we're attacking, right?" Riverstorm's eyes were sparking with annoyance.

"Go ahead, Echoheart." Amberfrost spoke up, her voice dripping with arrogance. "Tell your sister the *truth*."

"What truth?" Riverstorm looked from Amberfrost to Echoheart. "What is going on?" *I'm out of choices, but I know that Cedarclaw will support me.*

"The truth is," Echoheart took a deep breath, ignoring the deep stinging of her wounds. "Is that I'm in love with Cedarclaw. We've

been seeing each other in secret for moons now, and I love him deeply."

"Are you *insane?*" Riverstorm roared. "You would betray your own Clan? For a MoonClan tom? I knew you were something but...this...this is *disgusting.*"

"As if you would understand!" Echoheart hissed in return. "You have no idea what its like to be alienated by your entire Clan! To be treated like crowfood but every single cat who is supposed to love you!" Riverstorm winced slightly. "At least Cedarclaw has shown me love! He has shown me support! *He* cares about me!" Echoheart whirled around to face Cedarclaw who was back on his paws, looking horrified.

"Cedarclaw I've wanted to say this for moons, but I love you, with all of my heart. I want to be with you forever, I want to have kits with you and live my life happily with you! Please, that is all I want."

Cedarclaw's eyes were filled with fear and horror, something that made Echoheart feel anxious. "You can't be serious." Amberfrost laughed, and Echoheart had a sudden urge to claw the MoonClan she-cat. "Come on, Cedarclaw, be realistic. I'm sure this whole little relationship was fun while it lasted, but look at her? Is she really the cat you want to call your mate?"

There was a long moment of silence, despite the raging battle behind them all. Echoheart looked at Cedarclaw desperately, waiting for him to respond. After what felt like an entire season, Cedarclaw sighed and shook his head. "Amberfrost is right," *No.* "Echoheart, this was fun but...I don't love you. I never did." *No.* Echoheart felt her heart starting to shatter, pain spreading through her chest. *No.* The one cat she had given her heart to, the one cat she had decided to trust. *No.* He had told her such sweet things, cleared her mind when she was distraught.

"How could you..." Echoheart felt her body start to shake. "You..." The pain was becoming numb as it claimed her entire body. She stared at her paws, her claws ripping at the dirt below her. Then, something snapped inside of her. "You, *liar!*" She roared, the pain

turning into violent, white-hot anger. She sprung forward, extending her claws as far as she could. All she saw was the look of horror on Cedarclaw's face as she attacked him.

Echoheart felt her claws ripping violently into Cedarclaw's pelt, blood spraying the forest floor around him. "Stop!" Amberfrost cried, but Echoheart didn't listen. She tore relentlessly into Cedarclaw's body, anger surging uncontrollably inside of her, like a violent burning fire that threatened to consume everything in its path.

She felt warm blood spraying against her own pelt as she sank her teeth into Cedarclaw's shoulder, the taste of blood only fueling her rage. "Echoheart that's enough!" Echoheart heard Riverstorm's voice and felt claws grip her arms and pull her backwards, off of Cedarclaw.

Echoheart whipped around, raking her claws across Riverstorm's cheek. Her sister jumped back and through the fog of anger saw shock and horror in Riverstorm's eyes. Behind them, Amberfrost scurried over to Cedarclaw's limp form and started heaving him up onto her back. "You're insane!" Amberfrost cried before escaping with her brother, the last Echoheart saw of Cedarclaw was his blood soaked pelt. Her own pelt was soaked with his blood as well.

The anger inside her slowly burned away, leaving nothing but searing embers inside of her. "Echoheart..." Riverstorm breathed out, Echoheart met her gaze, seeing just how terrified her sister was of her. *Good.* Echoheart thought, she looked briefly towards the river where she caught a glimpse of her own blood-covered reflection. She felt broken inside, broken and empty.

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Echoheart reached camp, dragging her paws. Her pelt felt stiff and itchy from all the dried blood. Her wounds nothing more than a bitter sensation, as a matter of fact, Echoheart didn't feel much of anything. The heartbreak she had initially felt had done nothing but become an empty numbness in her chest. She didn't feel angry, she didn't feel sad, she just didn't *feel.*

AshClan had been successful in their attack, Goldenstar showed up and faced of with Cloudstar, explaining to her that AshClan would not stand for any attacks, she and Cloudstar fought before Goldenstar said she had made her point and called AshClan off. No AshClan cats had been seriously injured, they would all be back to their prime in a few short days.

As they settled back in Clan, cats went to the medicine cats to get their wounds treated, but Echoheart sat down near the entrance. She started washing Cedarclaw's blood out of her fur, as she tasted the bitterness of it she was brought back to that moment. All she really remembered was the look of horror on his face. It brought her a sense of satisfaction that she just couldn't explain.

Not long after her pelt was cleaned, Echoheart spotted Riverstorm leaving Goldenstar's den, the leader following her. "Echoheart," The leader called to her. "May I speak with you a moment?" *So Riverstorm told her.* Echoheart thought, rising to her paws. She didn't feel any resentment towards her sister, afterall, what was the worst that could happen? What could Goldenstar do to Echoheart that she didn't already suffer through.

Echoheart passed Riverstorm without even looking at her, she sat down in Goldenstar's den once they stepped inside. "Your sister told me what happened." Goldenstar mewed, sitting down as well, facing Echoheart. Echoheart couldn't read the leader's expression, but she also didn't really care to. "About your relationship with Cedarclaw and what happened during the battle."

"And?" Echoheart questioned. "Are you going to exile me now?"

"I'm not." Goldenstar replied. "I don't see any need to punish you, Echoheart." She was taken slightly by surprise by Goldenstar's words. "I can see that you have already been punished enough by your own actions, and Riverstorm told me how once Cedarclaw turned his back on you, you attacked him relentlessly. This to me, proves that you've moved past him and your loyalty has always lied with AshClan.

"I know that you haven't exactly had the best life. Your sisters outshine you and your father doesn't much care for you. I have been

in a...similar place to you, Echoheart." Echoheart blinked, unsure what exactly Goldenstar meant. "And it is in these moments that you realize not every cat is meant to walk with others. I left my family behind long ago, they only dragged me down and I taught Riverstorm this same thing. Family is important, but family doesn't make a strong warrior. It's heartbreak, loss, and hardships that make a strong warrior. You will come back stronger from this, Echoheart, I know you will."

Echoheart simply stared at Goldenstar, not sure what to say. *So she's the reason that Riverstorm is so distant, but I already know this.* Echoheart thought for a moment. *But she's not wrong. Riverstorm hasn't helped me, Jayclaw hasn't helped and Cedarclaw certainly didn't help me.* "If you understand what I've said, you may leave now." Goldenstar dismissed Echoheart, she dipped her head and walked out of the den, looking around AshClan camp.

But Goldenstar is right. I'm not meant to walk with others. I will stay an AshClan warrior, and I will become a strong warrior, but I will never put my heart in the paws of another. I will do this alone.

Chapter 27

A cold breeze entered the warrior's den, rustling Riverstorm's pelt and causing her to wake with a shiver. She slowly lifted her head, breathing in the air. It was brisk and cold, burning her nose. She winced slightly and rose to her paws, judging by the low sunlight outside she could only assume that it was dawn. She sat up and stretched, bracing herself to face the cold weather outside. When she felt like she was ready, Riverstorm braced the outside.

She stepped into camp, flinching as the cold weather completely overtook her body. She glanced up at the beautiful dawn sky as small, fluffy snowflakes fell slowly from the sky. *I guess leaf-bare is truly here now.* Riverstorm looked back into the warriors den, she could see that Ivyheart as well as a collection of other warriors were already gone. *I must have missed the dawn patrol.* She thought. *That's fine, I can ask Ivyheart if I can lead the next one.*

Riverstorm waited patiently, allowing the rest of her Clanmates to wake up. She sat near the warriors den, watching AshClan come to life. She saw Cloverstrike and Mudthorn taking Leafpaw and Petalpaw out hunting, the apprentices both seemed amazed by the snow. Riverstorm had never enjoyed the harsh season of leaf-bare, and she didn't intend on starting now and she had a inkling that the apprentices wouldn't enjoy it for long.

The dawn patrol soon returned and Riverstorm approached Ivyheart, looking for her own assignments. "Looking for a patrol, Riverstorm?" The deputy questioned and Riverstorm nodded in response. "I'll have you lead the sunhigh hunting party, take Sharptongue, Hollytail, Graypelt, Lionpelt and Berryleaf with you."

"Understood." Riverstorm dipped her head.

"Before you leave though, Goldenstar wants to have a meeting with the senior warriors and you."

Riverstorm lifted her head. "A meeting?" The last meeting that

Goldenstar had held had involved leading the attack on MoonClan a moon ago. "What about?"

"Not sure, let me gather the senior warriors and we'll meet her at her den." Once Ivyheart had gathered the warriors that Goldenstar had requested, they padded into Goldenstar's den where the leader was waiting patiently.

"Good morning, everyone." Goldenstar dipped her head. "I hope you're keeping warm."

"As best as we can." Jayclaw mewed, sitting down. "What did you need, Goldenstar?"

"Leaf-bare is officially here and we need to get to work while the snow is still light and cats are still healthy. Ivyheart I want extra emphasis on hunting patrols, we need cats hunting all throughout the day to keep AshClan fed. However, I don't want our border patrols to fall short either." The cats listened intently. "Ivyheart I want you to focus solely on hunting patrols, and Riverstorm, you will be in charge of border patrols."

All eyes went to Riverstorm who stared at Goldenstar in surprise. "Me?"

Goldenstar nodded. "You will be working for Ivyheart this season, together the two of you will plan out all of our patrols. You should make sure that the best hunters are chosen for the hunting patrols."

Riverstorm looked at Ivyheart. *I've been given deputy duties.* She couldn't help but feel a rush of pride and honor that Goldenstar trusted her with such a task. "I won't let you down, Goldenstar." Riverstorm bowed you head.

"I know you won't." Goldenstar purred. "You are all dismissed, except you, Riverstorm. I wish to have a word with you alone." Riverstorm nodded and once the other warriors had left, Riverstorm looked at Goldenstar expectantly. "As I mentioned a while ago, you would be mentoring one of Ravensong's kits."
"I remember." Riverstorm gave a small nod.

"Well I have been watching the kits closely and I have decided which kit you will be mentoring." Riverstorm listened with excitement. "I have chosen Batkit for you to mentor, he is energetic and has a very high energy drive. I think he will prove quite a challenge for you, but I know of all cats in AshClan that you will be able to handle it."

Riverstorm thought about Batkit, he was very high strung and very excitable. *He's perfect.* "Thank you so much, Goldenstar." Riverstorm bowed her head once again. "I am excited to begin his training once he turns six moons old. If you don't mind me asking, who will the other mentors be."

"I'm considering Rainsong for Nightkit, I know she will be out of the nursery by then and she will be eager to get her paws back to work. I've decided Owlstorm for Dustkit, and Echoheart for Crowkit." Riverstorm's ears twitched at the mention of her sister. "I'm not sure if you have noticed, but ever since the battle with MoonClan your sister has truly started to hone in on her warrior skills. She's more focused, more dedicated and a truly skilled warrior."

"I did notice." Riverstorm replied. "And I think an apprentice will do her well."

"I'm glad you agree." Goldenstar's eyes were pleased. "You may go now, you have a lot of work to do."

Riverstorm dipped her head one last time before stepping out of Goldenstar's den. She was met with Ivyheart and Jayclaw. "What did Goldenstar want?" Jayclaw questioned, he seemed curious, but also a little curt.

"She was just telling me that I will be mentoring one of Ravensong's kits." Riverstorm explained.

Jayclaw nodded approvingly. "Good. It's about time you got your own apprentice." He turned to Ivyheart. "I hope that once you take over leadership that you chose her as your deputy, it's clear thats what Goldenstar is pushing for."

"I will if I believe Riverstorm is the most capable cat." Ivyheart said

sternly before turning her attention to Riverstorm. "But first, we have things to do. I want to keep Lilyclaw, Hazelfern, Echoheart, Cinderflower, Sharptongue and Duskwhisker for the hunting patrols as they are our best hunters."

"Echoheart?" Jayclaw spoke up once again, Riverstorm noticed that Ivyheart's ears twitched in annoyance. "Are you sure about that one?"

"Yes I am." Ivyheart replied. "Regardless of what you think of her, Echoheart has shown great improvements in her skills in the past moon. She is often the one to bring home the most prey." Jayclaw silenced himself and turned away, going to speak to Gorsestrike. "Anyway," Ivyheart flicked her tail. "I'm assuming that we're keeping border patrols the same. One at dawn, one during sunhigh and one before we rest. Don't overwork cats, we have to work together to make sure that no one cat is getting over worked. AshClan is big, we have plenty of warriors to work with."

"I understand." Riverstorm and Ivyheart worked close together to get all the days patrols sorted out and once they were done, Riverstorm felt a strong sense of accomplishment. *I'm finally getting a taste of what its like to be deputy. I'm almost guaranteed to be made deputy at this point.* Riverstorm thought confidently. Now that all the patrols were settled, Riverstorm waited for her own hunting patrol to leave.

As she waited, she spotted Echoheart standing with Spiderheart as they started to set out on their patrol. Everything about Echoheart had changed since the battle against MoonClan. Riverstorm recalled that night clear as day, she had been so enraged that her sister had been seeing a MoonClan tom in secret, but then she saw what happened to Echoheart. She had never seen her sister, or any cat for that matter, turn so violent in the blink of eye.

She had seen her sister violently attack Cedarclaw and Riverstorm had been convinced that she had every intention of killing him. Even when Riverstorm pulled Echoheart off of him, Echoheart had attacked Riverstorm briefly. From the moment that they came home, Echoheart was different. She was shut off from everyone else, she barely spoke to other cats but she had been working hard as a

warrior so Riverstorm couldn't really fault her.

Riverstorm wasn't sure if she should be worried about her sister or not, but een if she tried to reach out to Echoheart, she knew that her sister wouldn't talk to her. *She hasn't even spoken to Moonwhisker.* Riverstorm shook her head as Echoheart left the camp, shrugging it off. *She'll get better soon. She made her mistake and now she's living with the consequences.*

"Are you ready?" Riverstorm heard the voice of Lionpelt as he padded up, the rest of the patrol joining them as well .

"Yeah," Riverstorm nodded. She couldn't spend time worrying about Echoheart, she had more important things to worry about. "Let's get going, we have a Clan to feed."

Chapter 28

Moonwhiskwer brushed away the thin layer of fluffy snow with her tail, breathing a sigh of relief when she spotted the large supply of catmint. "Oh thank StarClan." She said to herself, starting to inspect the precious herb. A few of the leaves were starting to die to the frost, but there was still plenty she could use. After discarding the dead and dying leaves, she nipped the herb off at the stem and started carrying it back to camp.

She had to trek out quite a ways to get the catmint, her paws were starting to become numb from the cold but she had to get the herbs back. With leaf-bare in full swing, sickness was around every corner and Moonwhisker was determined to stay prepared. *Last leaf-bare we lost Tawnyfrost and Goldenstar lost a life.* Moonwhisker was determined to not let that happen again. *I won't loose a single cat this season.* Moonwhisker had told herself over and over.

Moonwhisker finally reached the camp and stepped into the den, shaking loose snowflakes from her tabby pelt, she caught Eagleclaw's gaze and he looked at the herbs. "Oh good," He rose to his paws, pausing his current task. "I was worried it would all be dead. Go ahead and get it put away safely."

Moonwhisker set the herbs down, tucking them into a safe spot. "Have we had any sickness come up while I was gone?"

Eagleclaw shook his head. "I heard Lionpelt cough, but it didn't sound like illness to me. I checked him out and couldn't find any other signs."

"That's good." Moonwhisker noted. "I've been spreading the word for any cats to come to us at the soonest signs of sickness. We have a nursery full of kits, I don't want it spreading."

"Good call." Eagleclaw dipped his head. "We can never be too prepared for this." He returned to his task which was setting out all the other herbs. "Tansy...honey...feverfew..." He muttered to

himself. Both Eagleclaw and Moonwhisker knew it was best to use the less important herbs before resorting to catmint, they only had so much.

"Have you eaten today?" Moonwhisker questioned her mentor at the feelings of hunger growing in her own stomach, the first thing she had done this morning was go out and get herbs, she hadn't a chance to eat.

"No." Eagleclaw replied, not looking up.

"I'm going to go get us some prey." Moonwhisker told him. He flicked his tail in response and Moonwhisker padded out into the camp. She took a good look around, AshClan seemed to be living their lives as usual, just in the snow. She looked towards the entrance where Riverstorm was organizing patrols. She had been impressed with her sister being chosen by Goldenstar as a temporary deputy for leaf-bare, and she was handling it well.

Moonwhisker looked around camp for her other sister, her concerns about Echoheart seemed to grow every single day. Ever since the battle led against MoonClan, Echoheart had completely changed. She had a dark, haunted look in her eyes and she barely spoke to any of her Clanmates. Moonwhisker had tried asking her about it but she never told her why. Moonwhisker felt a twinge of pain at her sister's lack of trust in her.

Moonwhisker had reached out to Riverstorm as well, but Riverstorm had responded saying even though the two of them didn't fight anymore, they still weren't that close. Moonwhisker's mind started to drift, she thought about Featherstorm's warning. *I had been so worried about Riverstorm...* She set her eyes on the blue-gray she-cat. She was guiding cats with confidence, and her arrogance wasn't shoving other cats around, she was respecting her Clanmates. *I was warned that one of my sisters would live a path of bloodshed and violence.*

Moonwhisker's tail twitched anxiously. *But Echoheart would never hurt anyone? I know she wouldn't.* Moonwhisker took a deep breath, she couldn't worry about this right now, not during leaf-bare. *Perhaps I've already stopped it. Echoheart will return to normal soon, I*

know she will.

Shoving the thoughts to the back of her mind, Moonwhisker preceded to the fresh-kill pile where she grabbed a large squirrel for her and Eagleclaw to share, she was nearly to the medicine cat den when she heard coughing. Her ears twitched and her head instantly turned to the source.

She spotted a group of cats together and realized that the coughing came from Ripplestep. Berryleaf looked at her mate with concern in her eyes. "Are you okay?" She questioned, giving him a sniff. "You were coughing last night too."

Moonwhisker turned into the den, briefly setting down the squirrel before running back out into the camp, she trotted swiftly over to Ripplestep and gave him a sniff. "You were coughing last night?" She questioned. "I thought I told everyone to come to us at the soonest signs of sickness."

"I would've," Ripplestep mewed, his voice sounding dry. "But the coughing went away once I woke up."

Moonwhisker pressed her muzzle to Ripplestep's forehead, she could feel warmth. "You're starting to develop a fever." She explained. "Come with me, let's get this taken care of."

"Moonwhisker," Berryleaf squeaked. "Is it whitecough?"
"I don't think so." Moonwhisker shook her head. "But it could quickly become whitecough if we don't act fast."

"I'll be fine." Ripplestep promised. "I got greencough when I was just an apprentice and survived just fine." He gave a comforting purr to his mate before following Moonwhisker to the medicine cat den.

"What's going on?" Eagleclaw lifted his head, eyeing the two cats curiously.

"Ripplestep was coughing last night and just started coughing again. He has a small fever."

"You should've come to us sooner." Eagleclaw growled, twitching his tail irritably. Moonwhisker ignored her mentor and got

Ripplestep into a nest before giving him tansy and feverfew.

"Rest now." Moonwhisker told him. "You'll need all the rest you can to fight this sickness off." Ripplestep nodded and relaxed in his nest. Eagleclaw stepped off to the side and motioned for Moonwhisker to follow him. She listened and ducked her head.

"We need to keep a close on him." Eagleclaw responded.

"Why's that?"

"He's had greencough before, and he got it really bad." Eagleclaw replied. "I wasn't an apprentice yet, but I remember hearing the fears about Ripplestep dying. Not to mention he's older now, he's not a spry young apprentice. Sometimes getting severe cases of greencough can make it harder for the body to fight another sever case."

"I understand." Moonwhisker dipped her head, glancing over at Ripplestep who was stretching out. *Don't worry, Ripplestep.* Moonwhisker took a deep breath. *We'll take care of you, I promise.*

Now that Ripplestep was safely resting, Moonwhisker and Eagleclaw shared their squirrel. As the day went on, no other cases of coughing presented themselves. The sun started to set and the cold night claimed the forest. Ripplestep was sleeping peacefully and didn't seem to be getting any worse, as a matter of fact his coughing was getting less and less.

"Go ahead and get some rest." Eagleclaw told Moonwhisker. "I'll sleep here soon, I just want to make sure that Ripplestep breathes okay in his sleep."

"Alright." Moonwhisker mewed, letting out a small yawn in the process. "Just make sure you get some sleep." Moonwhisker reached her den and curled up, she had spent most of the day stressing about the impeding sickness that would sweep across AshClan. She knew that Ripplestep would only be the first case, but she also knew that she and Eagleclaw would do their absolute best to treat their Clanmates.

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Moonwhisker could barely hear voices in her head, she could hear the voices of Echoheart and Riverstorm, as well as Eagleclaw and Featherstorm. But her dreams were chaotic, flashes of faces and the scent of blood. She saw a pale brown tabby tom that she didn't recognize, but his amber eyes were full of malice. *Moonwhisker...* She could hear her name, but she couldn't figure out where it was coming from. *Who is calling my name?* Moonwhisker opened her mouth to speak, but she couldn't make any sounds.
"Moonwhisker!" A hushed hiss forced Moonwhisker's eyes to open and her dreams ceased. She was back in the medicine cat den, facing Petalpaw and Leafpaw. It took her a moment to blink away sleep and look at the two apprentices. When she finished, she realized that Leafpaw's eyes and nose were streaming. "Leafpaw woke up coughing, and look at her eyes and nose!"

"I see that, Petalpaw." Moonwhisker groggily rose to her paws and started inspect the apprentice. Similar to Ripplestep, Leafpaw had a slight fever. She listened to her breathing and heard that it was rough and shaky. "Petalpaw you need to go, Leafpaw is sick."

"But she's my sister."

"I know, Petalpaw." Moonwhisker touched her tail to the gray she-cats head. "But you have to trust me, I don't want you getting sick. As a matter of fact, please wash yourself before returning to your nest. Leafpaw will be safe in here with me and Eagleclaw."

Petalpaw seemed reluctant, but she stared down at her paws and sighed sadly. "Alright, but I'll be back tomorrow to see how you're doing Leafpaw!"

Leafpaw didn't seem that responsive, but Moonwhisker hoped it was from being woken up and not from the sickness.

"What's going on." Moonwhisker heard a familiar growl as Eagleclaw lifted his head. "Who is being so loud?" Waking Eagleclaw was something akin to waking a hibernating badger, Moonwhisker didn't want to keep him up for long.

"Petalpaw brought Leafpaw to me, she's sick." Moonwhisker explained.

"Keep her nest away from Ripplestep's." Eagleclaw grumbled before tucking his nose under his paw and falling back asleep. Moonwhisker guided Leafpaw to a nest a good ways away from Ripplestep and settled her into it, giving her tansy, feverfew and honey.

"Get some sleep." Moonwhisker purred softly, brushing her tail comfortingly over Leafpaw's ears. It didn't take long for the young she-cat to drift off into sleep. Moonwhisker breathed out a sigh before badding over to Ripplestep. His pelt had grown warmer as his fever grew, but his breathing sounded fine. *Please don't let them get any worse.*

Ripplestep was loved by so many, and Leafpaw was so young. Moonwhisker returned to her nest, but she wasn't sure how well she would sleep. *Leaf-bare has just begun. How much worse can it get?*

Chapter 29

"Take a breath please." Moonwhisker instructed, listening to Leafpaw's chest. The she-cat took a deep breath as told. "Again." She took another deep breath and Moonwhisker could hear how raspy it was, she sounded like she was struggling. After her second breath she let out a series of coughs. Moonwhisker looked at her sadly. "Lay down, Leafpaw." Moonwhisker told her and padded over to the herb store, grabbing a small amount of coltsfoot leaves. "Take these."

Leafpaw had been taking plenty of coltsfoot so she took it without arguing. *Her whitecough doesn't seem to be progressing, but I worry about her breathing.* Moonwhisker thought and took another look around the medicine cat den. In the half moon since Ripplestep and Leafpaw had moved into the medicine cat den, both of them had progressed to whitecough but Leafpaw had it worse compared to Ripplestep. They had also been joined by Dustclaw who had a minor cough and fever.

Once Leafpaw finished her coltsfoot, Moonwhisker padded over to Eagleclaw. "How is Leafpaw?" Eagleclaw questioned.

"Her symptoms aren't getting worse, but they're not getting better either." Moonwhisker explained.

"We're running low on feverfew." Eagleclaw's tail twitched. "I used a lot of it trying to get Dustclaw's fever down the other night."

"I can go out and gather more." Moonwhisker suggested.

Eagleclaw shook his head. "I'll go get it, you stay here with them. Check around camp too, see if anyone else is showing symptoms."

"Alright, Eagleclaw." Moonwhisker agreed and after a few moments, Eagleclaw ventured out into the cold. After making sure everyone in the medicine cat den was taken care of, Moonwhisker padded out into the camp. The Clan had been working hard to provide everyone with enough prey and the fresh-kill pile was filled with

plenty of prey. At least hunger wasn't going to be an issue this leaf-bare, Moonwhisker could focus solely on the sick cats, knowing that at least their bellies would be full.

Moonwhisker looked around the camp, trying to search for any signs of sickness, but most of her Clanmates seemed to be doing just fine. Moonwhisker took a moment to get herself a small mouse and sit outside her den, enjoying the fresh-air. As she ate her mouse, she heard pawsteps approaching. She turned her head to the side and saw Mistypool padding up to her.

"Good morning, Moonwhisker." Mistypool greeted with a purr and a dip of her head. "I don't think I can remember the last time I saw you relaxing."

Moonwhisker let out a small chuckle. "It's been a while, and I can't rest for long. I have patients that I need to tend to."

"All three of you seem to be working your paws off." Mistypool chuckled. "I don't think I've gotten to talk to any of you in what feels like moons."

"This is a busy season." Moonwhisker replied and finished off her mouse. She would love to stay and talk to her mother, but she couldn't leave the sick cats unattended for long. "I need to get back to them, it's about time for Ripplestep to take some herbs."

"Alright." Mistypool purred and touched her muzzle to Moonwhisker's forehead. "Don't forget to take care of yourself."

"I won't." Moonwhisker let out a soft purr, feeling comforted by her mother's words and touch. She turned around to enter the medicine cat den, but as she stepped through the entrance she heard a cough behind her. Moonwhisker's paws froze in place and looked over her shoulder. Mistypool was coughing lightly, clearing her throat afterwards.

"Are you alright?" Moonwhisker asked frantically, touching her muzzle to Mistypool's forehead. She didn't feel feverish, but the cough was concerning.

"I'm alright, Moonwhisker." Mistypool assured her, taking a step back. "It's just a small cough."

"It's never just a cough during this season." Moonwhisker argued. "I want you to rest in the medicine cat den tonight and take some herbs, if you're not coughing by tomorrow then you can return to the warriors den, okay?"

Mistypool's eyes softened. "Alright, Moonwhisker. If that will make you feel better." Moonwhisker breathed a small sigh of relief and guided Mistypool to a new nest where she settled down. Moonwhisker gave her some tansy and continued to check on the other cats in the den. *Please don't let this get any worse.* Moonwhisker thought, fears and anxieties creeping up her spine. *I don't know if I can handle losing my own mother.*

After a while, Eagleclaw returned with a small amount of feverfew. His eyes instantly went to Mistypool who was resting. "Another one?" He questioned once he set down his herbs. Moonwhisker nodded slowly. Eagleclaw let out a sigh and lowered his voice. "Moonwhisker, this is the first time you will be dealing with your own family member." She turned to him. "You cannot let that cloud your judgement, all the cats in this den require all of your attention. You cannot let your love for your mother put her over every other patient."

Moonwhisker looked at her mentor, would she be able to do that? Her mother was everything to her. "But--"

"My father is in this den right now," Eagleclaw explained, motioning to Dustlcaw. "I am worried about him because he's my father, but we are AshClan's medicine cats. We took a vow to care for every cat equally, treat your mother, but don't forget that there are other cats who need our skills."

Moonwhisker took a deep breath. "I understand, Eagleclaw." She looked over at all the cats in the den, her eyes resting on Leafpaw. *She's the worst of everyone.* Moonwhisker noted. *I will treat my mother, but right now Leafpaw needs my main focus.*

"I know it can be hard." Eagleclaw touched her shoulder with his

tail tip. "But there's a lot of cats who need our help. You need to keep your head clear."

"I will." Moonwhisker dipped her head, grateful for Eagleclaw's guidance. She returned to the cats in the den, checking over them once more. Once she was done, Moonwhisker settled down in her nest to finally rest her paws.

Just as she was starting to drift of, she caught the sound of frantic pawsteps. She lifted her head as Mousetail appeared in the medicine cat den entrance, holding Dustkit in his jaws. *Oh no.* Moonwhisker jumped to her paws and she had Eagleclaw raced across the den to the kit. "What's going on?"

"Ravenfur woke up to Dustkit coughing and he has a fever!"

"Calm down, Mousetail." Eagleclaw growled. "Let me look." Eagleclaw stepped forward and looked over Dustkit.

"I wanna go back to sleep." Dustkit complained. "I don't feel good."

"You're sick, Dustkit." Eagleclaw explained. "You need to stay in here."

"But I don't want to!" Dustkit argued, letting out a series of coughs.

"You have to." Moonwhisker spoke up, her voice soft. "You don't want to get your siblings or Rosekit and Blossomkit sick do you?" Dustkit lowered his head. "Stay in here and take some herbs and you'll be back to normal in no time, okay?"

"Fine." Dustkit sighed.

"Are you sure he'll be fine?" Mousetail questioned, fear filling his eyes.

"If you let us care for him." Eagleclaw growled.

"Go make sure that Ravenfur and the other kits are okay." Moonwhisker turned to Mousetail. "The others are bound to be nervous and we have to be sure that none of the other kits or queens are sick."

"Alright." Mousetail sighed. "I'll be back to check on you later, Dustkit!" Mousetail called to his son before walking away.

"This season is getting off to a rough start." Eagleclaw muttered under his breath, helpng Dustkit get settled into a nest. ugh start." Eagleclaw sighed. "Let's hope that it doesnt get any worse."

Moonwhisker nodded slowly, unsure of what to do now. She double checked to make sure that all of their patients were taken care off. When she had finished, she heard Goldenstar's call from the camp. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!"

"What's that?" Moonwhisker lifted her head, looking towards Eagleclaw.

"I think Blossomkit and Rosekit are having their apprentice ceremony." Eagleclaw replied without looking. "If you want to watch you can, but I have to organize the herbs again."

"Alright." Moonwhisker dipped her head and stepped out of her den, she didn't roam far, sitting just outside the medicine cat den incase something went wrong. She watched her Clanmates gather as Blossomkit and Rosekit eagerly rushed from the nursery, Rainsong struggling to keep up with them.

Moonwhisker noticed Lionpelt watching them proudly from the crowd, there was pure love in his eyes. *Did Jayclaw look at us like that?* Moonwhisker tried recalling her own apprentice ceremony. She barely saw Jayclaw these days, but she knew he was a busy warrior.

Once Blossomkit and Rosekit had finally reached the center of camp, Goldenstar began. "Cats of AshClan, I have gathered you all today because two of our kits have reached the age of six moons and are ready to embark down the path to become brave AshClan warriors." She looked over the two kits. "Blossomkit, from this day forward until you have earned your warrior name you will be known as Blossompaw. I have chosen Spiderheart as your mentor, she is a noble and strong warrior, I know she will train you well. Rosekit from this day forward until you have earned your warrior

name you will be known as Rosepaw. Your mentor will be Mousetail, he is a skilled and loyal warrior."

Both Blossompaw and Rosepaw touched noses to their mentors and the ceremony was completed. "Blossompaw! Rosepaw! Blossompaw! Rosepaw!" The cats of AshClan eagerly cheered on their new apprentices and the two of them certainly didn't waste any time getting started with their mentors. Moonwhisker let out a purr of happiness. *New apprentices are a good sign, and thats two less kits I have to worry about getting sick in the nursery.*

Moonwhisker was about to turn back into the medicine cat den when she heard coughing. Her head whipped around she looked towards the source. The coughing wasn't loud, and it didn't sound severe but the source chilled Moonwhisker's blood. It was coming from Goldenstar.

Chapter 30

Echoheart crept through the snow, her tail barely brushing the pale white surface. She kept her sense sharp, picking through the sharp scents of pine and frost. In the muddle of all the scents, Echoheart finally caught scent of prey. The faint scent of squirrel, she continued her silent stalk forward until she found the trail. She breathed in the scent as she grew closer and closer. At long lost she spotted the squirrel, a splash of red fur like blood across the snow. She steadied her breathing, the squirrel was completely oblivious to the danger that loomed just behind it.

Echoheart took a few more silent steps forward, before clearing her mind and taking a mighty leap forward. Her paws caught the squirrel and she killed it with a swift bite to the throat before it could even realize what was happening. Echoheart licked the blood off her lips, her stomach growling but she ignored it. *This needs to go to the sick cats.* She wearily reminded herself.

While prey wasn't a huge issues this leaf-bare, the sickness had been ravaging AshClan. Half a moon ago, Goldenstar developed whitecough, but she was far from the worst. From what Echoheart had heard from Moonwhisker, Leafpaw was unable to move from her nest and Ripplestep and Mistypool weren't much better off. Scorchlight had also joined the medicine cat den just a few days after Goldenstar and his sickness grew worse with each passing day. Dustkit hadn't gotten any worse and had been kept separated from the others in Goldenstar's den along with Dustlaw and were being cared for by Moonwhisker while Eagleclaw took care of the others. There was growing fear for the cats in the medicine cat, for Echoheart her fear lied in Ripplestep. Ripplestep had been one of the most important cats in her life, the only cat who never hurt her, who never doubted her. An image flashed in Echoheart's mind, the image of Cedarclaw covered in his own blood, eyes wide with terror. Echoheart shook her head slowly, she couldn't think about him now. She picked up her squirrel and started to retrace her steps to gather the rest of her prey.

Ever since that night, Echoheart hadn't felt...anything. She didn't feel regret, she didn't feel heartbreak, she didn't even feel rage. She felt nothing towards Cedarclaw, but she remembered the feeling of her claws ripping into his pelt, it was something that made her feel the slightest sensation of...satisfaction.

It had been something she had been wanting to do Riverstorm for a long time, to prove how strong she was. After so easily shredding Cedarclaw Echoheart knew for a fact that she could easily take on Riverstorm and win. *I don't want to kill her.* Echoheart noted. *I just want to put her in her place. I want to give her what she deserves.*

Echoheart knew those thoughts weren't right, but she couldn't help it. She did her best to suppress them most days but with Riverstorm as acting second deputy alongside Ivyheart, Echoheart, she just knew this power would go to her head. *AshClan is doomed if Riverstorm ever becomes deputy.* Echoheart thought with a flick of her tail.

Echoheart finally gathered up the rest of her prey and met up with the rest of the patrol. She had caught the most prey among the others, but that was common these days. "Nice catches everyone." Roseclaw mewed. "Let's take it back to camp, we have sick cats who need these."

Echoheart followed the patrol, keeping her distance from the others. She knew that her Clanmates could tell something was wrong with her, but she just didn't care. The walk back to camp was a short one, but once they entered something felt off. The scent of grief was heavy on the air. *Who died.* Echoheart's ear twitched. *Please don't let it be Ripplestep.* Echoheart thought. *Not the one cat I have left.*

Echoheart knew that her mother was sick as well, but Mistypool never seemed to care when Jayclaw would scold Echoheart. *She never stood up for me, why should I care?* Echoheart set her prey down and started looking around for answers. It was obvious that the rest of the patrol could sense it as well.

"What happened?" Roseclaw questioned, padding up to Berryleaf.

"Scorchlight died." She replied, her voice saddened.

"That's so horrible." Roseclaw lowered her head, sadness filling her eyes. *Scorchlight was a good warrior. He was one of the few sensible cats in this Clan.* Echoheart thought. A few moments later, Ivyheart appeared and raised her voice.

"Cats of AshClan, I'm sure you know by now, but our faithful warrior Scorchlight has passed away due to his sickness. Scorchlight was a noble warrior, he served AshClan well. He was also Goldenstar's mate and helped raised two incredible kits in Lionpelt and Hazelfern, it is a shame that he will not see Rosepaw and Blossompaw become warriors, but we know that he watching over them from the stars."

Echoheart looked towards Lionpelt and Hazelfern. Lionpelt had his muzzle buried into Rainsong's pelt, grief written plainly across his face. Hazelfern had the same torrid expression, but Echoheart noticed Graypelt assuring her, he had love in his eyes. *I see he got over me quick.* Echoheart noted. She could understand Lionpelt and Hazelfern's grief, afterall Scorchlight *had* been a good father to them while Goldenstar had barely been a mother.

Ivyheart had called Scorchlight Goldenstar's mate but it was clear to Echoheart and every other cat in the Clan that they hadn't been mates for a very long time. Scorchlight might as well have raised their two kits alone. *Goldenstar isn't that much better than Jayclaw.* Echoheart thought with a flick of her tail.

Once the Clan had finished their grieving, Echoheart returned to life as usual. She didn't have time to grieve Scorchlight, and she was finding it hard to grieve at all. *He's not my family, I barely even ever spoke to him. It's a shame, but it's not my problem.* Echoheart picked up a few mice and carried them over to the medicine cat den.

No cat other than Eagleclaw was allowed in the medicine cat den, so Echoheart placed the mice outside. "Eagleclaw!" She called. "I've brought prey!"

"Thank you." Echoheart heard the exhausted mew of the medicine cat. She didn't feel like waiting for him to come and pick up the

prey so she turned away and decided to take a few moments to rest. As she sat outside the warrior's den, having her own mouse, she saw Lionpelt helping the elders to prepare Scorchlight's body for his vigil. Echoheart watched, but not with a lot of interest. The day continued to go on and before long, it was time for Scorchlight's vigil.

Both medicine cats were absent as well as Goldenstar, but she was sick. Echoheart sat beside Scorchlight's body to pay her respects for a few moments, but she didn't plan on staying overnight. Lionpelt, Hazelfern, Raingsong as well as Rosepaw and Blossompaw were huddled close to his body, arranged as if he had been sleeping.

Once Echoheart felt like she had stuck around long enough, she padded into the warrior's den. She curled into her nest, resting her tail across her muzzle and closed her eyes. Scorchlight was the first death this leaf-bare, but would he be the last? He was the last one to get sick while Ripplestep had been sick the entire season. He had gotten worse, but surely he would survive? Ripplestep was a strong warrior.

Echoheart shoved the thoughts out of her head and forced herself into a dark, cold and dreamless sleep.

Echoheart opened her eyes slowly, feeling rested after her nights rest. She knew she had her first patrol at sunhigh, so she wasn't super concerned about waking up too early. Once she felt ready, Echoheart stretched out and stepped into the cold morning air. She let out a yawn and stretched once more, looking around to see how the camp was doing.

There was another cloud of grief hanging over the camp, similar to when they returned from patrol. *Are they still this sad about Scorchlight? Or did something else happen?*

"Echoheart." Echoheart's ears twitched as she heard the voice of Riverstorm. *What does she want?* Echoheart thought bitterly. Echoheart met her sister's gaze and saw it filled with grief and sadness. *Mistypool.* Was Echoheart's first thought. "Mistypool died last night in her sleep, she was gone when Eagleclaw woke up."

There was a storm of conflicting feelings in Echoheart's chest, she felt sadness, but not she same kind of sadness that was on Riverstorm's face. *My mother is dead.* She felt this burning feeling, almost like guilt. *I should be sadder, but then again, what did she do for me?* "Are you alright?" Riverstorm questioned, taking a gentle step forward.

There was a spark of anger inside of Echoheart briefly and she instinctively took a step back. *Don't pretend like you care about me now.* Riverstorm stared at her in confusion, clearly noticing Echoheart's reaction. "I'm...." Echoheart stammered. *Am I okay? What exactly am I feeling?* "I will be." She forced the words out. "Our mother was a kind warrior, I will miss her dearly." She dropped her head, finding herself faking the same grief that she had seen Lionpelt and Hazelfern display.

"She was in fact a wonderful warrior." Riverstorm nodded. "I am sad to say goodbye to her, I loved her so much. However, she is watching over us from the stars." *Fitting that she would start caring about me now, after she's dead.*

"How is Moonwhisker handling this?" Echoheart knew that of all three of the siblings, Moonwhisker was by far the most emotional.

"She's distraught but she's focusing on caring for the sick cats so we hopefully don't lose anymore." Echoheart slowly nodded. *Moonwhisker is a good medicine cat.* Echoheart thought to herself.

"Riverstorm," Both she-cats heard the voice of Ivyheart and turned towards the deputy. "I am about to call a meeting regarding the death of your mother, would you two like to say something about her."

"I would." Riverstorm spoke and Echoheart gave a small nod. Ivyheart reached the center of camp and raised her voice.

"I regret to inform you all that we lost another warrior during the night. Mistypool passed away in her sleep, the loss of two amazing warriors in such a short span of time hurts our Clan deeply. She leaves behind three wonderful kits, our brave and fierce warriors Riverstorm and Echoheart as well as our loving and intelligent

medicine cat Moonwhisker who is fighting hard to keep our cats alive."

Ivyheart gave Riverstorm a nod and she rose to her paws. "My mother raised us with compassion and dignity, she had a soft spot for us kits and she always looked out for us." *Looked out for you maybe.* Echoheart held her tongue. "I know I speak for myself as well as my sisters when I say she will be deeply missed." Riverstorm looked to Echoheart, it was now her turn to speak on the matter.

Echoheart tried to come up with something to say, her mind drifted slowly back to when they were kits. Mistypool would always take care of them when they were kits, she would play with them, remind them how strong they were. *Why didn't she do that when I was older, when I needed her most.* Echoheart took a deep breath and cleared her throat. "My mother would always make sure we were safe when we were younger she--"

"Mistypool was an incredible mate," Echoheart's blood turned hot as Jayclaw stepped forward, interrupting Echoheart. "I was happy to call her my own, and she helped to raise our kits." *She did all the work.* Echoheart fought the urge to attack him. *How dare he interrupt me.* Echoheart could tell that all the other cats in the Clan noticed his interruption and they were staring at Echoheart awkwardly. "Raising kits isn't easy, but together myself and Mistypool raised a fine bundle of kits. With Riverstorm being one of the most respected warriors in the Clan and Moonwhisker being one of the finest medicine cats in the forest." *Why would he mention me?*

Echoheart felt rage burning deep inside her at the sight of her own father, she wanted to attack, she wanted to rip his pelt to shreds. She wanted to show him all of the pain that he had made her feel, the sheer embarrassment and humiliation that he had inflicted on her. She blocked out the rest of Jayclaw's speech and walked away when it was done, she had no intentions of sticking around to be judged by her Clanmates. *My father hates me and everyone already knows it. Guess he just had to remind them.*

Echoheart was finally away from the rest and preparing to leave for her patrol when she saw something strange. She looked over to the medicine cat den and saw Ripplestep standing in the entrance. His

body was frail and small, his legs shaking as he stood. *What is he doing?* Echoheart turned away from the patrol and rushed across camp to her former mentor. "Ripplestep," She spoke. "What are you doing?"

"Ripplestep!" Echoheart heard the shouting of Eagleclaw as the medicine cat followed him. "Have you got bees in your brain? Get back to your nest."

"I need to talk to Echoheart." Ripplestep's voice was dry and raw from coughing.

"You are incredibly weak and sick you--"

"Eagleclaw," Ripplestep coughed. "You and I both know what's happening to me, and I need to talk to her, please. I will make it quick."

A dark shadow crossed Eagleclaw's face. *What do they both know?* Echoheart looked from Ripplestep to Eagleclaw, but neither of them revealed what Ripplestep had meant. Finally Ripplestep looked to Echoheart. "I heard your father's speech," He mewed, keeping his voice low. "And I hope you understand, that just because he is your father doesn't mean his opinion of you is worth more than crowfood. Echoheart you are an incredible warrior, I never want you to forget that. I treasured you as my apprentice, and I wish I could have raised you instead of that foxheart."

Echoheart could tell his words were genuine, they filled her with a sense of love. *He means those words. I wish he could've been my father too.* "Please don't ever forget how strong you are, Echoheart."

"I won't, Ripplestep, I promise." Echoheart dipped her head. "Thank you." She felt her voice trembling slightly.

"Alright," Eagleclaw spoke up. "You've said what you needed to say, now come back to your nest."

"Yes, Eagleclaw." Echoheart took a step back and watched Ripplestep return to his nest. *StarClan, please don't take him from me.* Echoheart was preparing to walk away when Ripplestep was

suddenly taken over by a violent coughing fit. Echoheart's eyes went wide and she watched as his legs trembled until they gave out completely,

"Ripplestep!" She cried out and tried running forward.

"Get back!" Eagleclaw hissed and Echoheart jumped back. Her cry had gotten the attention of the rest of the Clan and Berryleaf started running over to her mate, Mousetail, Hollytail and Spiderheart weren't far behind. "Stay back!" Eagleclaw roared once again, forcing Ripplestep's family to step back.

Echoheart and Rippletail's family watched in horror as Eagleclaw worked on Ripplestep, but Echoheart had dark feeling digging into her chest. *He's not moving.* Ripplestep's body had become hauntingly still, and what seemed like seasons later, Eagleclaw let out a sigh of defeat.

"Whats's wrong?" Berrytail spoke, her voice in a panic.

"I'm sorry." Eagleclaw lifted his head. "The sickness was too much for him to handle." Berrytail let out a small wail and dropped down, Spiderheart and Mousetail went to her side, with Hollytail following. Before Hollytail reached her mother and her siblings she stopped and shot a look at Echoheart, causing her to tense.

"Why was my father out of his nest in the first place?" She mewed, Echoheart sensed hostility.

"H-He wanted to talk to me." Echoheart replied.

"About what."

"Hollytail," Spiderheart lifted her head. "Is now really the time for this."

Hollytail ignored her sister. "Tell me, Echoheart."

"He wanted to...tell me to ignore what my father said."

"He should've been in his nest!" Hollytail spat, Echoheart winced. "Instead he was out here talking to you and now he's dead!"

"Hollytail!" Mousetail hissed.

"Tell me I'm wrong." Hollytail demanded, lashing her tail. Echoheart stared to tense. *This isn't my fault.* She started to feel her stance shift into one of defense. "He's wasn't *your* father, it's not his fault that--"

"That's enough!" Berrytail rose her voice, causing Hollytail to wince. "Your father would never stand for you speaking to a fellow warrior like that! The bond between mentor and apprentice is strong and Ripplestep would've been a father to every cat in this Clan if he could! Echoheart didn't cause his death so don't you dare ever accuse her of such a thing again. Your father would be so disappointed in your, Hollytail."

Hollytail dropped her head and turned away, walking back over to Ripplestep and the rest of her family, but not without shooting one final glance towards Echoheart. Echoheart forced herself to look away, flicking her tail in annoyance. She ignored what her Clanmate had said and focused on Rippletail.

The only cat who truly cared for me is gone. The realization twisted inside of her, turning her stomach and spreading agony throughout her chest. *What do I have now?* A dull ache swept through her entire body, she felt herself trembling slightly. *I have no one else now.* Riverstorm never cared about her, Jayclaw hated her, she assumed that Moonwhisker did but she cared more about her position as medicine cat.

Echoheart truly had no one she could reach out to, no one she could trust to talk to. She took a few steps back away from Ripplestep's body. *What am I supposed to do now?*

Chapter 31

The gentle, calming sounds of chirping birds flowed over head, carried by the early newleaf breeze. The scent of blooming flowers and growing leaves filled Moonwhisker with a sense of calm, a sensation she hadn't felt in so long. She sniffed the air, tracking down the scent of poppies. She padded through the forest until she spotted the bright red flower. She sat down in front of it while starting to collect the seeds. Moonwhisker allowed herself some time to relax, not that leaf-bare was over.

The deaths of Scorchlight, Ripplestep and Mistypool were still clinging to her pelt like heavy burrs. Especially the loss of her mother, she wished that she could've done more. It hurt even worse that Eagleclaw had made Moonwhisker take care off the less sick cats in Goldenstar's den. She hadn't been there to help with any of the three cats who died.

She didn't know why Eagleclaw had sent her away, not allowing her to help. *I'm a medicine cat too. I could've helped.* Moonwhisker was sure that he was doing this just to protect her, but he couldn't do that forever. She had been a medicine cat for a long time, she had to learn how to deal with these things. She would've felt better if she would have been able to help, but know she felt like she wasn't even given a chance.

When Moonwhisker had enough poppy seeds she started venturing back to camp, another issue nagging at her mind. Even before the deaths of Mistypool and Ripplestep she had been worried about Echoheart, but now her sister had gotten even worse. She wasn't talking to anyone, Moonwhisker had tried reaching out to her but she had either ignored Moonwhisker or brushed her off, it was starting to feel helpless. Moonwhisker let out a small sigh as she walked back, she was running out of ideas. It seemed as if everything in her life was starting to crumble around her. *I need to make sure my sisters are okay.*

Moonwhisker finally reached camp, which was lively and fully

active. Cats were heading out for patrols and talking over prey. They were welcoming the warmer weather, but there was still a chill in Moonwhisker's chest. The anxiety that crept up inside her made her feel nauseous, she couldn't shake it no matter how hard she tried, it was suffocating at times. Moonwhisker kept her eyes focused on the path ahead of her, trying to keep her mind focused on anything else.

She padded forward until she reached her den. She set the poppies down and started separating the seeds from the flowers. If she could just focus on her tasks, maybe the anxiety would pass and everything could just return to normal. She worked slowly, counting each poppy seed in her mind. She was simply allowed herself to black out any intrusive thoughts. She managed to keep this up for quite a while.

"Moonwhisker may I speak to you?" Moonwhisker glanced up from her herbs, turning over her should at the cat that entered her den. It was Hazelfern, looking slightly concerned. Moonwhisker rose to her paws and turned to face the she-cat.

"Of course, Hazelfern." Moonwhisker dipped her head slightly. "What can I do for you?"

"I've been feeling a little strange these past few days." Hazelfern padded softly into the medicine cat den.

"How so?" Moonwhisker looked her up and down, nothing seemed to be visibly wrong with her.

"I've been feel sickly and I have absolutely no energy lately, I can never get enough sleep, I'm always tired and I'm just worried something is wrong with me."

"Let me take a look." Moonwhisker approached Hazelfern, giving her several sniffs, she could scent any illness on her body. "Have you been eating?"

"Yes actually, I'm always hungry but eating makes me feel sick." Moonwhisker was pretty sure she knew what was going on but she had to be certain.

"Would you mind laying down on your side?"

"Sure." Hazelfern listened without complain, laying down and showing her belly to Moonwhisker. Moonwhisker ran her paw slowly across Hazelfern's belly. It was definitely getting bigger, and not from increased food consumption.

"You can stand up now." She noticed Hazelfern struggling slightly to stand up.

"So is something wrong with me?"

"Quite the opposite." Moonwhisker purred. "You're expecting kits, Hazelfern." Her green eyes lit up almost immediately, her expression shifting into one of pure love and joy.

"Oh that's wonderful! I am so excited to tell Graypelt!" Her tail started waving happily. "How far along am I? Do you know?"

"I would say about half a moon." Moonwhisker assessed. "You can move into the nursery at any point you would like, if you feel any pressing symptoms you should move as soon as you can and of course come see me if you ever have any concerns."

"Of course, Moonwhisker." Hazelfern was purring loudly, her eyes shining brighter than the sun. "Thank you so much, Graypelt is going to be so happy!" Hazelfern turned around and quickly padded out of the medicine cat den. After a few moments, Moonwhisker also stepped outside, she peered across camp and spotted Hazelfern approaching Graypelt.

The gray tom was sitting with Lilyclaw, his tail resting across his paws. Moonwhisker couldn't hear the conversation but after a few moments, Graypelt jumped to his paws and eagerly nuzzled Hazelfern. Lilyclaw stood up, nuzzling her brother with affection. Moonwhisker felt warmth flood her chest as she turned back into her den. Now that newleaf was here, AshClan was bound to get more kits. *We're thriving.* Moonwhisker thought. *AshClan will always thrive.*

The thought was bittersweet however, Moonwhisker still felt the

loss of her Clanmates weighing heavily on her shoulders. She missed her mother dearly, she knew that Mistypool was happy and safe in StarClan, but she also knew it could be a very long time until she ever heard her mother's voice again. Moonwhisker let out a quiet sigh before returning to her work.

She heard heavy pawsteps a few moments later and Eagleclaw entered the den, his jaws holding a mouthful of yarrow. "Welcome back." Moonwhisker greeted her mentor, turning to him for a moment. He set the herbs down and didn't respond, his eyes seemed distracted. Moonwhisker looked at her paws for a moment. "Hazelfern is expecting kits." She spoke up.

"That's good news." Eagleclaw's voice was still distracted. Moonwhisker wished she could tell what was wrong with him, he had been acting distant for a while now. Moonwhisker let out a quiet sigh and turned back to her herbs. *Clan life has returned to normal.* Moonwhisker thought. *Cats are having kits and AshClan is thriving and yet...* Moonwhisker looked over to Eagleclaw. *Things in the medicine cat den have changed.*

Chapter 32

"Nothing to report on the SunClan border." Riverstorm spoke, reporting to Ivyheart with the results of her reports. "The border was a little faint, but it seems like SunClan may have just been slow getting out on patrol today."

"Thank you, Riverstorm." Ivyheart gave Riverstorm an approving nod. "Get yourself some prey."

"Will do." Riverstorm confirmed and padded away from the deputy, feeling her paws drag slightly. Now that newleaf had arrived, Ivyheart no longer needed help planning patrols and Riverstorm was back to being a normal warrior, something she didn't like. She missed being deputy, it felt right for her. *I was made to be deputy.* Riverstorm thought, glancing briefly over her shoulder at Ivyheart. The deputy was starting to show her age more and more. *She'll retire soon enough, and I will take her place.* Riverstorm reminded herself.

And today was a day that Riverstorm had been looking forward to since she had been made a warrior; Ravenfur's kits were becoming apprentices. She's was more than ready to start training an eager young apprentice, she would train them just as Goldenstar had trained her. *I will make her proud.* Riverstorm vowed. She would make sure that Batkit would become a strong and loyal warrior.

Riverstorm padded over the fresh-kill pile and grabbed herself a mouse, sitting near the warrior's den. The ceremony would be held soon, she glanced over to the nursery where Ravenfur was desperately trying to get her kits in order with Mousetail attempting to help. Batkit in particular was quite rowdy, he had a lot of energy that Riverstorm would have to work with, she would make sure to correct his behavior and shape him into an honorable warrior.

Riverstorm waited patiently for the ceremony, she had waited this long she could wait a bit longer. She looked around for the other mentors, knowing that Echoheart was on patrol and the ceremony wouldn't start until she got back. Riverstorm wondered how here

sister would handle being a mentor. *She's been working hard lately, I can credit her that much.* Riverstorm thought, looking down at her paws. *But she never speaks to anyone unless she has to. Perhaps having an apprentice will be good for her.* Riverstorm's tail twitched, she had a weird form of faith in her sister, it could be that training an apprentice would be just what Echoheart needed.

It's been four moons since she attacked Cedarclaw, surely she can't still be stuck up on some useless MoonClan tom? Riverstorm struggled to understand how the two of them even managed to get feelings for each other. Riverstorm often struggled to grasp how cats fell in love, she had never felt such a thing. Half a moon ago, Graypelt and Hazelfern announced they were having kits and Hazelfern soon moved into the nursery. She overheard Robinflight as well as a few other she-cats mention how badly they wanted kits.

The thought of being trapped in the nursery for eight moons was enough to make Riverstorm never want kits, let alone the idea of having to deal with squealing and annoying kits all day long. *I'm glad others are having kits, but its not for me.* Riverstorm's thoughts about kits were stopped when she heard pawsteps as Echoheart's hunting patrol returned.

She glanced towards their direction and saw Echoheart at the lead with a mouthful of prey, she was carrying the most out of her patrol, something that wasn't unusual. As the patrol returned and set their prey on the fresh-kill pile, Ivyheart spotted them and padded towards Goldenstar's den, presumably to tell the leader that it was time for the ceremony.

Sure enough, a few moments later, Goldenstar emerged and proceeded to the center of camp. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!" Her powerful voice spread throughout the camp, getting the attention of every cat in AshClan, specifically the kits.

Ravenfur and Mousetail had to fight them from running off, Riverstorm's ear twitched in annoyance. She didn't act like that when she became an apprentice. *Or did I?* Riverstorm couldn't remember, it felt like so long ago.

Riverstorm sat down beside Lionpelt and waited for the rest of the Clan to gather. She made eye contact with Jayclaw who gave her an approving nod, he knew she would finally be getting an apprentice.

Once the Clan had finally gathered, the four kits sitting close together and squirming with anticipation, Goldenstar could begin. "I have called this meeting because four of our young kits have reached the age of six moons and are ready to set their paws forward on the path to becoming warriors. The four kits muttered quietly to themselves in pure excitement.

"Batkit," Goldenstar spoke loudly, pulling the gray tom forward. *My apprentice is first.* Riverstorm lifted her head high. "From this day forward, until you have earned your warrior name you will be known as Batpaw. I have chosen Riverstorm as your mentor, she is one of the most loyal and respectable cats in this Clan and I know that she will shape you into just as fine a warrior."

Riverstorm rose to her paws and confidently padded to the center of the crowd and faced Batpaw. His amber eyes were as wide as the sun and his paws trembled with excitement. Riverstorm leaned forward and touched her muzzle to his, forming their bond as mentor and apprentice. They then walked to the side and sat back down.

"What are we--" Riverstorm shot Batpaw a look, silencing him. He stopped himself and nodded, sitting up straight. *He's trying to imitate me.* Riverstorm thought, stifling a chuckle. She returned her attention back to the ceremony.

"Nightkit, from this day forward until you have earned your warrior name you will be known as Nightpaw. Your mentor will be the calm and kindhearted Rainsong, I know that she will mentor you will." Rainsong and Nightpaw did the same thing that Riverstorm and Batpaw did before stepping to the side.

"Dustkit, from this day forward until you have earned your warrior name you will be known as Dustpaw. Your mentor will be Owlstorm, he is a well seasoned and experienced warrior, he will be a wonderful mentor." The last apprentice remaining was Crowkit, arguably the best behaved apprentice. "Crowkit, from this day

forward until you have earned your warrior name you will be known as Crowpaw. Your mentor will be Echoheart, she has turned herself into a respectable and honorable warrior, I trust her to train you well."

Echoheart stepped forward, wearing her usual stoic expression, but her marshy green eyes seemed every so slightly softer. Echoheart touched her muzzle to Crowpaw's and the two of them returned to the crowd.

"Batpaw! Nightpaw! Dustpaw! Crowpaw!" The Clan cheered loudly for their newest apprentice and Ravenfur and Mousetail watched their kits with pride. Once the meeting ended, Batpaw jumped to his paws, clearly ready to start talking now.

"I'm so excited!" He beamed. "I wanna do everything! I wanna catch a bird, and explore the forest and--"

"The first thing you'll learn how to do is show some respect and dignity." Riverstorm mewed, making her tone sharp so Batpaw learned. Batpaw cut himself off and tried to compose himself.

"Right." Batpaw held his head high. "What shall we do first?" *He's forcing it now.* Riverstorm playfully rolled her eyes. "We can start with some hunting training," His eyes went wide. "There's no guarantee that you will catch something today, but we can get started on the basics."

"Okay!" Batpaw was clearly very eager to learn, but Riverstorm could tell she had a lot of work ahead of her if Batpaw was going to learn patience and discipline.

"Let's head out." Riverstorm took charge and started leading her new apprentice outside of camp.

"Aren't we going to train with my siblings?" Batpaw questioned, looking over his shoulder as his voice sounded slightly downtrodden.

"There will be time for that later." Riverstorm informed him. She barely trained with Echoheart when she was an apprentice,

Goldenstar worked her hard and she turned out great because of it. Riverstorm didn't plan on keeping Batpaw completely isolated from his littermates during training, but she needed his complete focus for now.

Riverstorm led Batpaw away from camp towards the small clearing in the center of the territory. As they padded through the forest, she saw Batpaw looking around with pure awe. He was completely starstruck by how big their territory actually was. Riverstorm struggled to remember if she had been the same way. She was realizing she didn't remember a lot about her early apprenticeship when Silverstripe was still her mentor.

She hadn't thought about her first mentor in a long time, she wondered if he was proud of the things she had done and the warrior she had become. *He was a good mentor, we just weren't a good match.* Riverstorm reminded herself.

At long last, the two of them reached the clearing and Riverstorm faced her apprentice. He was clearly still in awe about the forest around him, he seemed more keen on exploring than learning. "Focus please." Riverstorm raised her voice, drawing Batpaw's attention back to her.

"Sorry, Riverstorm." Batpaw faced her once more, standing slightly more rigid.

"It's alright, but when you're out with me I expect you to be focused. You have a lot to learn if you want to become a strong warrior like me." Batpaw gave a small nod and focused on her. "Hunting is one of the most important skill a warrior can know, prey determines if our Clanmates will survive. The first step is learning the hunting crouch."

Riverstorm demonstrated but dropping into the perfect hunting crouch. "Copy me." She instructed.

Batpaw dropped down as well, it was surprisingly good but he still needed help. Riverstorm rose to her paws and circled him twice. She placed her paw on his hind leg which was jutting out at an improper angel and pushed it in. "You need to make yourself small

and compact, you'll be putting all of your power into your hind legs and aiming with your forepaws."

She picked up a pinecone and placed it down a few mouselengths away. "Try and pounce on the pinecone." She instructed and sat down, watching her apprentice closely.

Batpaw didn't wait and jumped forward, one paw landed ahead of the other, hitting the pinecone and sending it flying into the brush. Batpaw's stance was clumsy and he slid forward, bumping his chin on the ground. "You need to keep your form better." Riverstorm spoke, retrieving the pinecone. She placed it back on the ground. "Watch." Batpaw sat back up and watched Riverstorm intently.

Riverstorm dropped into the hunter crouch and pounced, her paws landing cleanly on the pinecone to show Batpaw what he needed to do. She rose back to her paws and faced Batpaw, she was struggling to read his expression. "Let's keep going." She watched Batpaw pounce again, this time his paws came short of the pinecone. Riverstorm looked at her apprentice with interest. *We have a lot of work to do.*

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"Get some rest, Batpaw." Riverstorm told her apprentice once they returned to camp, she could see just how exhausted her apprentice was, they had worked hard to master the hunter's crouch but he still wasn't quite getting it. *I wonder what's going wrong.* Riverstorm pondered, watching her apprentice go to his siblings who had already returned.

"There you are, Batpaw." Nightpaw mewed. "We were wondering where you were." Riverstorm sat down, starting to wash her paws, she couldn't help but overhear their conversation however, even as Batpaw lowered his voice.

"I was really exciting to learn how to hunt but I just couldn't get the hunter's crouch right and Riverstorm wouldn't let me try anything. She's going to be such a strict mentor, I was hoping for someone fun."

Riverstorm's ears went back slightly. *Training isn't supposed to be fun. It's training.*

"Really? I love training with Echoheart, she's amazing. She's very calm and understanding, we all went around the territory today. We missed you." Crowpaw explained, making Riverstorm feel even more annoyed.

"I wish I got someone like Echoheart as a mentor." Batpaw sighed, crushing Riverstorm even more. *He wishes for...Echoheart? Instead of me? I am one of the greatest warriors n this Clan and he wants my sister over me?* She was feeling genuinely offended, how could Batpaw say something like that?

"You doing alright over here?" Riverstorm tuned out the apprentice's conversation as Lionpelt approached her. "I hardly ever see you spacing out like that." He sat down beside her.

"It turns out my apprentice would rather have my sister as a mentor." Riverstorm grumbled.

"Is that so?" Lionpelt let out a chuckle. "Let me guess, you're trying to train him just like my mother trained you."

Riverstar looked over at him. "Of course I am, that's what made me a great warrior."

"You are a great warrior, and maybe that method of training worked for you but it doen't work for everyone. Every apprentice is different, we have to adapt our skills to train apprentices. Batpaw isn't you and you aren't Goldenstar. You need to listen to your apprentice, he's not ambitious like you, he just wants to be a good warrior."

Riverstorm looked at her paws. *I suppose he does have a point...* Riverstorm had been so focused on honoring Goldenstar that she didn't realize how different Batpaw was from her. *I want to make him into a great warrior, but just because he's not like me doesn't mean he won't be.* Riverstorm took a deep breath. "Thank you, Lionpelt." She turned to her friend. "Tomorrow I will start fresh with Batpaw, I'll be a good mentor to him."

"Good." Lionpelt flicked his tails over her ears. "I understand you idolize my mother, but you're your own cat now Riverstorm. Follow your own heart."

My own heart? Riverstorm looked over to Batpaw once again, laughing and having fun with his siblings. *My heart is telling me to be a good mentor to Batpaw, and that's just what I'll do.*

Chapter 33

"Featherfall! Petalshine! Leafwind!" The cats of AshClan cheered their newest warriors who sat in the center of camp radiating pride. Riverstorm cheered as well, the three warriors had certainly worked hard and earned their place as AshClan warriors. Riverstorm stepped away from the ceremony, wanting to move on with her day. She had training to do with Batpaw that she wanted to get done.

He had endless energy and she needed to get his paws out into the forest as soon as possible. Ever since she received him as an apprentice three moons ago she had been working hard to adapt his training style. He had such a wonderful attitude and his dedication was nothing short of inspiring. Riverstorm had found herself changing as well, being around Batpaw had made her feel...softer.

She was more relaxed, she felt more patient and she had found so much enjoyment watching Batpaw grow and refine his skills as a warrior. Riverstorm's heart swelled with pride each time he perfected a talent. She had briefly wondered if this is what a parent felt, she still didn't want any kits but she felt a certain bond to Batpaw, a similar one that she felt to Goldenstar.
AshClan also continued to thrive, Hazelfern had given birth to Graypelt's four kits, thought one of them, Crowkit, had not survived his first night. They were heartbroken, but still had Grasskit, Harekit and Oakkit. The Clan would remain strong, even with the loss of one kit.

She glanced over at the brand new warriors, they were conversing with their families and celebrating the moment. She recalled her own warrior ceremony, she had been incredibly proud of herself and she still was, now she looked forward to the day where Batpaw was named a warrior. *Speaking of. We should get some training done.*

Riverstorm's eyes scanned the camp until she spotted Batpaw sitting with his sister Nightpaw. Riverstorm trotted across camp at a steady pace until she reached her apprentice, their eyes were alight with

excitement following the ceremony. Batpaw looked up once Riverstorm came closer.

"Hi, Riverstorm!" His attitude has also changed during his training. Batpaw still had a lot of energy and was very playful, but during training he was very focused and respectful. Riverstorm still had to work a lot to keep up with his energy, but she loved training alongside him.

"Hello, Batpaw. Nightpaw." She dipped her head at the two apprentices.

"The ceremony was a lot of fun to watch!" Batpaw exclaimed. "I really can't wait until we get our warrior names!"

"In order for that to happen," Riverstorm mewed playfully. "We need to get back to training."

"Right!" Batpaw jumped to his paws, eyes burning with ambition. "I'll see you later, Nightpaw!" He bid farewell to his sister and he and Riverstorm began venturing into the forest. "What are we doing today?" He asked eagerly, his pawsteps were light and his tail held high.

"We're going to practice on your tracking." Riverstorm explained. "I will try and hide from you and you will have to track me. We'll do it several times, and I will make it harder each time."

"Sounds fun!" His eyes sparkled. His tracking skills were definitely something that needed improving, but she had faith in the young tom. They reached a large pine tree and Riverstorm faced her apprentice.

"Stay here and wait. When you feel ready, come and find me but give me time to hide." Batpaw nodded and Riverstorm ducked into the pine trees, she made sure to weave between trees and make a complicated path. She wouldn't make it too difficult for the first one, but she still wanted him to work for this. She padded swiftly through the forest until she came until a large section of brush, she climbed into the brush and ducked down to try and hide herself.

After a few moments of waiting, she eventually caught the scent of Batpaw. The wind was blowing towards her, so he wouldn't be able to catch her scent on the breeze, he would have to track.

She could hear him in the distance, shuffling pine needles and muttering to himself. Riverstorm remaind quiet, waiting patiently. She eventually caught sight of Batpaw's dark scent as he sniffed the pine needles to track her. He looked around, nose twitching as he tried to track her down. She could see when he kept on the trail as his eyes lit up.

He followed the trail and soon came to the brush, locking eyes with Riverstorm. "Found you!" He declared. Riverstorm let out an amused purr and rose to her paws.

"Not bad, it took you a bit too long and you need to be quieter, I don't want to hear you coming."

"Right." Batpaw gave a sharp nod.

"Let's try this again, this time I will actively be trying to hide my scent." Batpaw nodded once again and Riverstorm slipped into the pine trees, moving fasting and twisting around the trees. She sniffed the air and found a patch of boarage, an herb with a sharp, zesty scent. She rolled around the borage and continued her hiding.

She eventually reached a thick cluster of pine trees and brush which allowed her to shelter herself. *Let's see if he can find me now.* Riverstorm started waiting, she knew that Batpaw had to be looking for her now but she couldn't hear him. *He really improved his silence skills.* However, she figured she should at least scent him by now. *Maybe I made it too difficult.* Her ear twitched, wondering if he was really struggling.

Even more time passed and Riverstorm started to feel even more concerned. She rose to her paws, trying to spot any movement but only caught the subtle movements of the light breeze. *Where is--*

"Riverstorm!" Riverstorm heard Batpaw's terror filled cry split the air, Riverstorm's paws immediately started sprinting towards the sound, her heart instantly beginning to race as fear pulsed through

her veins. "Riverstorm!" He cried again and she caught the scent of Batpaw and something else, a foul stench covered the apprentice's sent, turning her blood to ice. *Fox.*

She followed the scent and heard the sounds of running, eventually through the trees she spotted the rusted pelt of the fox chasing Batpaw. Riverstorm let out a shrill cry and charged forward, putting power into her haunches and launching herself forward. She slammed into the fox's face and sank her claws into its flesh above its eyes, she looked over her shoulder at Batpaw. "Run! Get help! Now!" Batpaw didn't hesitate, he turned and started sprinting back towards camp.

Riverstorm held on as tight as she could to the fox, it swung its head wildly trying to shake the warrior off but she wasn't letting up. She wasn't expecting the fox the slam its face down into the ground, pain shot up her shoulder and she lost her grip, slipping onto the ground. She scrambled to her paws, ignoring the throbbing ache in her shoulder.

She moved just in time to avoid the fox's snapping jaws. She leapt back and let out a hiss as she faced the fox. It was a male fox, large and healthy. *I can't take this by myself. Please hurry Batpaw.* The fox charged forward, slobber flying from its mouth as it snapped its teeth. Riverstorm knew she couldn't fight so she kept leaping around and dodging its attack, she needed to keep it in the same place so Batpaw could lead the help to her.

She had to move quickly and precisely to avoid getting seriously wounded or killed. It took everything she had to avoid the attacks and it still wasn't enough. She failed to dodge one of the fox's attacks and felt teeth sink into her hind leg. The fox bit down fiercely on her leg and lifted Riverstorm off the ground.

She felt her body fly as the fox tossed her to the side like a limp piece of prey. The pain in her shoulder was aggravated as she hit the ground. Pain blurred her vision and she looked at her leg, she could see blood pooling on the forest floor from the wound. *I'm not dying here!* Riverstorm forced herself back to her paws, she had to make an attack as the fox charged forward.

Ignore her wound, Riverstorm launched herself forward and landed on the fox's face again. She let out a cry of pure rage and raked her claws violently down the fox's face, shredding its eye. The fox howled in pain and shook its head sharply, Riverstorm couldn't hold on and she rolled to the ground, her body was sore and her lungs burned. *Don't give up. Keep fighting.* She rose to her paws once again while the fox shook its head still, sending blood spraying across the forest floor.

She mustered more strength and hissed in challenge, but another voice howled above her own. An AshClan patrol led by Goldenstar exploded onto the scene, several powerful warriors swarming the fox. Batpaw was there was well, he ran to Riverstorm. "Are you okay?" He asked frantically.

"I am." She mewed, still feeling exhausted. "Thank you, Batpaw." She looked back to the fox, the cats in the patrol along with Goldenstar were Echoheart, Jayclaw, Graywillow, Lilyclaw and Cloverstrike. Riverstorm couldn't help but think they should've brought more, this fox was strong she could tell as it fought with pure energy even with one eye.

Riverstorm looked at her leg, it was coated with blood and continued to bleed. *Should I fight? Or should I stay out of it.* She was exhausted and her shoulder throbbed with pain. The fox let out a sudden howl and went after Graywillow and Echoheart. Both she-cats leapt out of the way, but the fox swiftly followed Graywillow. The fox sank its sharp teeth into Graywillow's shoulder and threw her violently against a thick pine tree, there was a sickening snap and her body fell to the ground like a stone in water. Riverstorm's stomach twisted when Graywillow didn't move. "Go check on her." Riverstorm told Batpaw. *I need to get into the fight.*

Riverstorm charged forward back into the fight, she leapt onto the fox's back and started battering its spine and shoulders. The AshClan warriors fought viciously, they needed to drive this fox away. The fox bucked its hind quarters, trying to shake Riverstorm off. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted a golden blur as Goldenstar went for the fox's throat, she had fury in her eyes.

Goldenstar leapt for the fox's neck, slashing at the sensitive flesh but

the fox wasn't allowing it. It swung its massive paw and threw Goldenstar to the side, going for the leader's throat. Riverstorm let go of the fox's back and jumped down to help defend her leader. Riverstorm wasn't as stable as she was when this fight started and was thrown to the side.

This, however, gave Goldenstar time to get back to her paws. The fox still moved as quick as lightning and sank its teeth into her shoulder, sending a spray of blood on the forest floor. *No!* Riverstorm hissed and attacked the fox again. She saw the rest of the patrol rushing towards the fox as well, all ready to protect their leader.

They swarmed its' face and the fox let go of Goldenstar. Lilyclaw and Riverstorm lashed at its eyes while Echoheart, Jayclaw and Cloverstrike went for its throat. The fox thrashed around in a panic and let out yelps of fear.

It started to turn away, its face covered in blood and clearly blocking its vision. "Chase it out of the territory!" Jayclaw yowled as the fox started to retreat. Jayclaw, Echoheart, Lilyclaw and Cloverstrike gave chase to the fox, snapping and clawing at its heels and hindquarters. Riverstorm didn't follow, her leg was too badly wounded and she needed to look after Goldenstar.

She turned to the leader who was laying on her side, panting as blood poured from her wound. Riverstorm limped over to Goldenstar and looked over her, her breathing was starting to slow and the light in her eyes was fading. "Goldenstar!" Riverstorm mewed, placing her paws on the wound, blood spilled out from around them.

"It's okay, Riverstorm..." Goldenstar mewed weakly. "I'm going to lose a life...I still have...one left." *One left.* Riverstorm felt fear swell in her chest, she still tried to stop the breathing, but it was a losing battle as Goldenstar's eyes slowly closed and her breathing came to a stop, as did the blood flow.

Riverstorm stepped back, watching the leader in horror. "Riverstorm?" She heard a tiny whimper from Batpaw who laid near Graywillow's body, the she-cat still hadn't moved. "I-is Goldenstar

okay?"

"She's losing a life." Riverstorm replied, her voice dry. "She'll be back to us soon." Not long after she spoke the words, Goldenstar's body twitched and she opened her eyes slowly. The light slowly returned to her gaze and she weakly lifted her head.

"How is Graywillow?"

"Sh-she's not breathing." Batpaw squeaked, his voice sounding broken.

Goldenstar let out a low sigh. "Let's wait here until the others return." Her eyes travelled to the bloody wound on Riverstorm's leg. "That is a nasty bite. Are you alright?"

"I will be." While they waited, Riverstorm sat down and gave her wound some licks. The bleeding had slowed significantly but as the adrenaline faded from her body the agony took its place.

After a brief wait, the rest of the patrol returned, they looked exhausted but triumph shined in their eyes. "We chased the fox towards SunClan territory, we'll have to let them know, but it is severely injured.

"Good." Goldenstar's voice was completely exhausted, but she managed to sit up. "Graywillow is dead." The lights faded from their eyes as it was replaced by a dark shadow of grief. "We need to get back to camp."

Lilyclaw and Echoheart lifted Graywillow's body while Jayclaw supported the weak Goldenstar, Riverstorm felt Batpaw at her side as well, keeping her steady as she struggled to walk with her wounded leg and shoulder.

The walk back to camp was agonizing, Riverstorm's vision was starting to blur the closer and closer they got. When they finally reached the camp, Riverstorm could barely focus. She and Goldenstar were led to the medicine cat den and the moment Riverstorm's body hit a nest, she slipped into darkness.

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Riverstorm's eyes slowly opened as she was back in the medicine cat den. Her shoulder was throbbing, but her leg felt better. She weakly lifted her head and glanced at her leg. It was wrapped in a thick layer of herbs and cobwebs, her should also smelled strongly of herbs. She noticed Moonwhisker who was picking something out of the herb store. She turned around and saw Riverstorm awake.

"Oh! You're up. I'm so glad." Moonwhisker set her herbs down and breathed a sigh of relief, padding over to give her shoulder and leg a sniff.

"How long was I out?" Riverstorm asked, remembering the last time she had been out for two days due to a concussion.

"Just over night. We held a vigil for Graywillow, but you were pretty badly injured. The injury on your leg was deep and your shoulder was dislocated, we put it back into place but it will be sore for a while. You'll be off duties for at least two moons."

Riverstorm sighed, remembering the state of her leader. "How is Goldenstar? She lost a life."

"She's doing well. The wound is healing and she's resting. Everyone else is fine as well, some minor wounds but they're all taken care of.

Riverstorm breathed out a sigh of relief. "That's good..." She looked at her paws. *That was a horrible fight.* She thought.

"Goldenstar actually wanted to speak with you, you should be fine to walk over there just take it easy. Come back to me before you go to bed so I can change your dressings and give you poppy seeds."

"Thank you, Moonwhisker." Riverstorm dipped her head and rose to her paws, her entire body felt bruised and she limped heavily. She left the medicine at den and instantly felt the cloud of grief that hung over AshClan camp in the wake of Graywillow's death. She knew that Windheart and Rainsong would deeply be grieving the loss of their mother, they had lost Silverstripe the exact same way, to a fox.

Riverstorm tried not to think about her former mentor as she finally

reached the leader's den. She stepped inside, noticing Goldenstar and Ivyheart lying close together, their pelts pressed closely together as Goldenstar rasped her tongue over Ivyheart's ears. *There's no hiding it, the two of them are mates.*
Riverstorm didn't particularly mind, she had known for a while but they tended to keep it quiet around the rest of the Clan and she knew that Graywillow was Ivyheart's sister. Goldenstar lifted her head and met Riverstorm's eyes, Riverstorm noticed the herbs placed on her shoulder and neck where the fatal wound had been.

"I'm glad to see you up, Riverstorm."

Riverstorm nodded. "Me too. Moonwhisker told me that you wanted to see me."

"I did." Goldenstar nodded, Ivyheart sat up and started washing her paws. "I wanted to tell you how proud of you I am. You faced a fox all by yourself to protect your apprentice and continued to fight despite being wounded. You have the true heart and soul of an AshClan warrior."

Riverstorm's heart was warmed by Goldenstar's genuine praise, she dipped her head. "Thank you so much, Goldenstar. It is an honor to serve you and this Clan."

"It is an honor to be your leader, now go get some rest." Riverstorm nodded and left Goldenstar and Ivyheart alone. As she padded away she felt something weighing on her shoulders. *Goldenstar only has one life left. Her leadership is coming to an end and I'm worried.* She glanced towards the leader's den one last time. *What does the future for AshClan hold?*

Chapter 34

Between the pine trees Echoheart could see Crowpaw's slender frame as he crept through the trees, his amber eyes burning with an intense focus. She watched him carefully, judging his every moment. The gentle afternoon breeze carried the scent of sparrow through the trees, Crowpaw had already caught the scent. He crept forward and Echoheart followed him silently.
Crowpaw eventually spotted the sparrow, the small bird was pecking at the ground looking for its own meal, but if Crowpaw did this right, it would never find that. Crowpaw ducked low to the ground, Echoheart could see the sheer concentration on his face. *Crowpaw has always struggled with birds, will he be able to catch this one?* Echoheart wondered, watching her apprentice with interest.

Crowpaw took a few silent steps forward, he was very aware of his surroundings as he avoided nudging a pine cone that surely would have given him away. He took a silent breath and leapt forward, the bird took off once he jumped but it wasn't fast enough. Crowpaw's claws hooked into one of the sparrow's wings and he brought it back down to the forest floor, killing it instantly. He muttered his thanks to StarClan quietly and buried his kill, moving on to the next hunt.

His initial jump was a bit clumsy, but he still managed to catch the sparrow. I'm proud of him. Echoheart thought and continued to follow her apprentice as he proceeded with his assessment. Crowpaw had been Echoheart's apprentice for four moons now, and it had been the only thing she found enjoyable since attacking Cedarclaw. She actually found some kind of happiness for once, even if it was different to the happiness she had once felt.

Echoheart's emotions had become a mystery to her, she didn't feel anything the way she used to. She went about her life as a warrior, training Crowpaw and going on patrols but she couldn't quite grasp to how she used to feel, before Cedarclaw. She still felt hollow, like something had been taken from her. Training Crowpaw brought her

a sense of satisfaction, she loved how willing he was to learn and he was humble and modest. *He'll make a fine warrior some day.*
She wasn't even sure she could call it happiness, but it kept her satisfied and distracted from thinking about her thoughts and emotions. All she wanted to do these days was focus on training her apprentice, nothing else.

She followed Crowpaw as he neared the SunClan border where he caught a squirrel with ease. She let him catch two more pieces of prey before she decided to end the assessment. She stepped out of the trees and as soon as Crowpaw saw her he jumped back, looking horrified. "S-sorry, Echoheart." He apologized, clearly out of breath. *Am I that scary?* "I was just worried that you were a fox." *Ah.* It had been a little over a moon since a fox had been encountered on AshClan territory and claimed the life of Graywillow.

Riverstorm had been badly wounded and confined to camp off duties, Echoheart couldn't help but admit to herself that it had been enjoyable watching her sister be so miserable. However, the *rest* of the Clan regarded Riverstorm as a hero, which Echoheart struggled not to gag at.

I would've done the exact same thing if it had been Crowpaw. Echoheart thought sourly. *But of course it had to be her.* "No worries." Echoheart told her apprentice. "You will scent a fox long before you see it." *Unless you're Batpaw.* "Let's collect your prey and get back to the others."

Crowpaw agreed and they started re-tracing his trail to pick up all of his prey. Ever since the fox attack, Batpaw went into great detail about how terrifying the whole ordeal was, and while Echoheart agreed fox attacks were scary, he had scared all of the apprentices senseless. She wished that Batpaw would just shut up for once.

Echoheart pushed her disdain for the young apprentice aside and led her own back to the meeting spot. They got there just after Rainsong and Nightpaw. Crowpaw's sister sat proudly with six pieces of prey, just above Crowpaw's five. Crowpaw didn't look upset, Echoheart had taught him very early on that he's not trying to compete with his siblings, he just needs to do the best they can. Luckily, all of Crowpaw's siblings, even Batpaw, were all supportive

of each other. *I wonder what that's like.*

Echoheart flicked her tail and sat down, waiting only a few short moments for Owlstorm to return with Dustpaw and Batpaw. Since Riverstorm was confined to camp due to her injuries, it had fallen on the three of them to continue Batpaw's training while she recovered since Goldenstar didn't see it necessary to give him a new mentor.

Usually the training fell on either Rainsong or Owlstorm, as Echoheart didn't like training with Batpaw. She couldn't help but wonder if her disliking of the apprentice was connected to her hatred of Riverstorm, she didn't necessarily hate Batpaw, she just didn't enjoy his personality or being around him. *Perhaps I'm being unfair, we'll see what kind of warrior he turns into.* Echoheart hated the idea of Batpaw growing up to be just like Riverstorm and Goldenstar, but he didn't seem all that arrogant, just a little airheaded.

"Everyone did a great job." Owlstorm mewed upon returning to the group, he looked down at Batpaw who had shimmering eyes. "I'll be sure to tell Riverstorm how well you did."

"I agree." Rainsong purred. "You did such a good job Nightpaw, I'm proud of you."

"You as well, Crowpaw." She looked at her own apprentice. "You did an amazing job, you usually struggle with catching birds but you caught your sparrow with ease." After each apprentice passed, they started the short journey back to camp.

The four apprentices placed their kills on the pile and Owlstorm walked over to Riverstorm who had been sitting with Cloverstrike. Echoheart paid them no mind and grabbed her own mouse off the pile to eat.

Everything was fine until she noticed Berryleaf talking to Goldenstar and Ivyheart about something, she looked scared. *What's going on?* A few moments later, Goldenstar went to the center of camp and raised her voice. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!"

Echoheart quickly wolfed down the last of her mouse and joined the Clan in gathering. Goldenstar looked down at Berryleaf. "Please tell them what you just told me." All eyes went to Berryleaf.

"I know some of you have noticed that Robinflight has been acting strange lately." *Has she?* Echoheart didn't really spend a lot of time with the senior warrior, she scanned the crowd to find her but the spotted ginger she-cat was nowhere in sight, but a lot of the older warriors were agreeing with Berryleaf's statement. "She leaves the camp for long periods of time and hasn't been eating a lot, I'm not sure what's wrong with her but she's been missing since yesterday afternoon. I have no idea where she went, but I'm worried about her. She's my best friend."

"Ivyheart I want search parties sent out immediately to find her, she could be in danger and we need to find our Clanmate right away." *Leaving for long periods of time?* Echoheart had a theory, because it was something she had done herself. *Has Robinflight taken a mate in another Clan?*

Ivyheart stepped forward. "Echoheart, you'll lead the search patrol closest to the twolegplace behind camp, spread out and search everywhere. Take Sharptongue, Dustclaw, Spiderheart and Cinderflower. Heatherstorm you'll lead the patrol towards the LichenClan border." Ivyheart named all the patrols with Jayclaw leading a patrol near the SunClan border.

The patrols didn't waste any time as they ventured out into the forest. Echoheart was glad that no one on her patrol especially after the way Spiderheart treated her when Ripplestep died. Echoheart chose not to think about that now. "Everyone spread out." She mewed when they neared the edge of the twolegplace. "The second you find her call out to the rest of us."

The patrol broke apart and Echoheart ventured closest to the twolegplace, doing her best to track Robinflight's scent. She checked every tree and bush she could find, she was starting to give up hope when she caught the very faint scent of the AshClan warrior. *Yes!*

Echoheart honed in on the scent and continued to track it, she noticed that she was getting drawn closer and closer to the

twolegplace. *Surely Robinflight didn't leave to become a kittypet?*

The scent of Robinflight grew stronger and stronger, Echoheart was right next to the twolegplace, she was wary about entering by herself, but Robinflight could be in serious danger. She swallowed her fear and cautiously stepped into the twolegplace. She quickly became overwhelmed without countless unknown scents, it was a struggle to keep track of Robinflight's.

Echoheart kept focused on the trail, but was feeling nauseous as she caught so many other scents. The trail led her to a small twolegnest with a small grassed area blocked off by some kind of wooden barrier. The scent of Robinflight was all over the place, along with the scent of an unknown cat.

Echoheart crept around the twolegnest, making sure that she wouldn't be noticed. She skirted around the edge keeping track of Robinflight's scent. "Echoheart?" She heard a familiar mew and looked over her shoulder to see Robinflight in the patch of grass. "I knew that Goldenstar would send someone for me!" She let out a sigh of relief.

"Robinflight what's going on?" Echoheart padded over to the she-cat, slipping under the barrier. "Why are you in the twolegplace?"

Robinflight let out a pained sigh. "It's a long story, basically I met a kittypet named Duke and we started seeing each other in secret, stupid I know, it was only for a few days then I stopped. Then I found out I was carrying his kits." Echoheart's eyes went wide. *So I was right.* "I told him and he demanded that I have the kits here and live with him. I told him that it would never happen and my kits would be raised as warriors in AshClan, about half a moon ago I gave birth in the twolegplace, he refused to let me take them to AshClan. He would let me leave, but not them. I've been going back and forth between AshClan this entire time to try and feed my kits."

"Wow." Echoheart stared at her. "But you're not trying to live as a kittypet?"

"No!" Robinflight shook her head. "I wanted to raise my kits as AshClan warriors, not kittypets. I never even wanted to have kits or

be mates with Duke, I made a stupid descsion and now I'm paying the price for it."

"Then let's get your kits and get out of here." Echoheart urged. "Where are they? Is Duke around?"

Robinflight nodded. "He is, but if we can get them out quickly it shouldn't matter. Are you alright going inside the twolegnest?"

Echoheart really wasn't, but she would do it to help her Clanmates. *I almost made the same mistake.* Echoheart would've wanted someone to help her, so she would do the same for Robinflight. She followed the she-cat to the other side of the nest where she saw a small hole in the bottom. "This is how I get in and out."

Robinflight slipped inside the hole and Echoheart followed, there was a small drop onto a large wooden structure. There were several other objects that allowed a path for them to jump down onto the ground. Echoheart noticed a small bundle of colorful pelts and caught the scent of kits.

Echoheart felt like she was trapped inside this place, but she toughed it out. She followed Robinflight as they went over to the pelts, Echoheart saw three kits playing and wrestling. One of them looked almost identical to Robinflight but with a slightly different shade. The others were very similar in appearance, both orange tabbies. "Mama!" The spotted tabby jumped over to Robinflight and nuzzled her, then looked at Echoheart. "Whos this?"

"This is Echoheart," Robinflight explained. "She's going to take us back to AshClan."

The kits eyes went wide. "We're really gonna go?"

Robinflight nodded. "Echoheart this is Foxkit, she was originally named Fox by Duke but she likes to be called Foxkit. Those two are Ruby and Jupiter, they didn't want warrior names."

"Well, well." A deeper voice spoke and Echoheart turned, unsheathing her claws and facing the newcomer. It was a large orange tabby tom, he wasn't muscular, he was plump. *This must be*

Duke. "Dragging more forest filth into my home, Robinflight?"

"I told you I'm taking my kits back to AshClan." Robinflight hissed. "You can't stop me."

"Robinflight may have just had kits." Echoheart stepped forward, baring her teeth. "But I haven't, so you're letting us take these kits or we'll fight for them.

"I don't *wanna* go with you." Echoheart looked to the side and saw Ruby complaining.

"Yeah me neither." Jupiter agreed, both she-cats looked annoyed. "The forest is yucky, you always come home smelling weird."

"I like the smell." Foxkit mewed awkwardly. "Mama I wanna go to the forest with you! *Please!*"

Robinflight looked at Foxkit, then sadly at Ruby and Jupiter. "Do you two really not want to go to AshClan with me?" They both shook their heads. She let out a saddened sigh and turned to Duke. "Will you allow me to take Foxkit to AshClan, and Ruby and Jupiter can stay with you."

Duke thought for a moment. "I suppose."

Robinflight padded over to the other two kits. "You do know that someday, the twolegs will separate you from your father, in the forest you'll be with me forever."

"That's okay." Ruby mewed quietly. "We already know, we'd be separated from you too."

"I love you two so much, you know that right?"

"We know, mama." Jupiter mewed. "We love you too, we just don't want to go to the forest."

"Then I will allow you to make that choice. I will *always* love you two, my whole entire heart. I know you will live wonderful lives here in the twolegplace. If you ever feel lost, look up towards the stars and you will know that I am watching them too, so is Foxkit."

"I'll miss you guys." Foxkit padded over to her sisters. "But we'll always be sisters, right?"

"Right!" Jupiter agreed, the three siblings all nuzzled each other.

"We should get going." Echoheart urged, she didn't want to rush but the rest of the Clan was still looking for Robinflight.

"Goodbye my beautiful kits." Robinflight touched her muzzle to both Ruby and Jupiter before turning to Duke. "Thank you, Duke. Take care of them." Duke gave a small nod and Robinflight took Foxkit in her teeth and the three of them left the den, Echoheart had never been more grateful to be somewhere else.

She set Foxkit down and turned to Echoheart. "Please, can we keep all of this a secret from Goldenstar? Tell them that I was expecting kits and got captured by a twoleg. They took Foxkit from me but I was only able to just now get her back. It is my right as a queen to keep my mate a secret."

"I will, Robinflight." Echoheart promised the queen and the two of them started the journey back to AshClan territory. *I wasn't expecting this at all today, but I will make sure to keep Robinflight's secret safe. She will be a good mother. Something thats seems impossible for me.*

Chapter 35

AshClan is growing every day. Riverstorm thought as she stepped away from the ceremony. AshClan had just welcomed the new warriors of Blossomheart and Roseshine and just a few days before, Graypelt and Hazelfern's kits had been named apprentices with Spiderheart, Hollytail and Mousetail as their mentors.

AshClan was a powerful force full of strong warriors, Riverstorm couldn't be prouder of what her Clan had grown into. It had been three moons since the death of Graywillow, and the Clan had recovered from the loss, as had Riverstorm. The wound her leg healed up without issue, leaving only a faint scar and her shoulder was completely healed as well. She was able to return to training Batpaw after about a moon and a half of recovery. She finally felt back to her normal self, happy to get Batpaw's training back on track.

Riverstorm glanced towards the nursery for a brief moment, she saw Robinflight watching her sole kit, Foxkit playing with a pinecone while she watched. That had been a very unexpected series of events, Berryleaf announces that Robinflight is missing from camp and she returns along with Echoheart and a single kit.

She gave the story that she was captured by twolegs when she was expecting kits and they wouldn't giver her her kit back, but the story just didn't fit right to Riverstorm. She couldn't help but feel slightly distrustful, especially since Robinflight refused to come forward about who Foxkit's father was. She knew that a queen didn't have to say who the father was if she wanted, but she couldn't help but feel that something else was going on.

Is the father of Foxkit a kittypet? Riverstorm wondered, but at least Robinflight was home and with her kit. Robinflight chose the life of a warrior and so did her kit. Foxkit had accidentally let slip that she had two sisters, but that Robinflight had been unable to free them from the kittypet. Foxkit didn't ever mention her father, and she rarely talked about her two sisters.

Whatever the case is, Riverstorm thought. *At least Foxkit will grow up to be a loyal AshClan warrior.* Riverstorm let out a sigh and started searching for Batpaw, they had their training to do and she wasn't going to waste any time. She found Batpaw leaving the elder's den with Crowpaw, it had recently become more crowded when Dustclaw, Duskwhisker and Cinderflower all moved in across the last few moons.

"Batpaw!" She called to her apprentice, he looked towards Riverstorm and swiftly trotted in her direction.

"Hi, Riverstorm." He greeted with excited eyes. "What are we doing today?"

"I was thinking some more battle practice."

"Hey, Riverstorm!" She heard a call and looked over her shoulder to see Moonwhisker trotting over to her and Batpaw. "Are you busy right now?"

"Not yet, why?" She could see something was off about her sister, she looked to be a little frantic.

"If you and Batpaw have some time, would you mind helping me? Eagleclaw and I are trying to prepare for leaf-bare."

"Isn't leaf-bare like a long time away?" Batpaw tilted his head.

"It's only two moons at most, and our supply of catmint is smaller than it was last leaf-bare, and we know what happened then." Riverstorm thought back to the last leaf-bare that AshClan had suffered through which had claimed the lives of Scorchlight, Ripplestep and their mother, Mistypool. Riverstorm usually wasn't one for collecting herbs, but she could see how frantic Moonwhisker was. *Plus, Goldenstar only has one life left. I don't need her getting sick, the Clan still needs her.*

"Of course, Batpaw and I would love to help." Riverstorm agreed. "Lead the way." Batpaw seemed excited about this, he was never one to complain about his training. They followed Moonwhisker out of camp and towards the back end of AshClan territory. She stopped

them at a lush area and Riverstorm could very faintly smell catmint.

"This is all that's grown." Moonwhisker let out a sigh as she motioned with her muzzle towards a pathetic looking patch of catmint. It didn't look like enough for even two cats, let alone a Clan as big as AshClan. "I can't even collect all of it for fear that it won't grow back. We may have to venture into the twolegplace to get it this season, which is the last thing we want to do."

"Is there anyway to make it grow faster?"

"We've been trying since last season, Eagleclaw is usually pretty good about getting it to grow but it refuses. If we get a serious out break of greencough and we don't have enough catmint to treat it, then we could lose so many warriors."

"Aren't there other herbs you can use to treat greencough?"
"There's chickweed, which we have a decent supply of and tansy but those don't come close to be as effective as catmint." Moonwhisker sighed and started picking a small amount of the catmint. "I'm scared, Riverstorm." Moonwhisker lowered her voice. "I'm worried about our Clan, if we can't get enough catmint and we get a severe outbreak..." She slowly shook her head. "Then there's nothing that Eagleclaw and I will be able to do for them."

Riverstorm could see the genuine fear in her sister's eyes. *Is leaf-bare really going to be that bad this year?* She wondered. *I should talk to Goldenstar about this.* Riverstorm made a mental note to speak to the leader after she was done helping her sister.

She and Batpaw helped Moonwhisker gather as much chickweed and tansy as they possibly could before returning to the camp. Riverstorm and Batpaw helped her put the herbs away as well.

"Thank you two so much." Moonwhisker dipped her head. "I'm sorry for dumping all of worries on you, I just needed to talk to someone about it."

"Don't worry about it." Riverstorm touched her tail to Moonwhisker's pelt. "I'm always here if you need to talk."

"Thank you." Moonwhisker sighed, she looked visibly exhausted.

"I'll leave you to your herbs, come on Batpaw." Riverstorm left the medicine cat with Batpaw following her and they stepped into the main camp. "Thank you for your hard work today, go ahead and get yourself some prey and we'll do more training a little later. I'm going to talk to Goldenstar."

"Alright, Riverstorm! Thanks!" Batpaw happily bounded off, she was glad that he hadn't heard much about the looming threat of leaf-bare, he had been shaken up enough by the fox attack and she wanted him to keep his hopes high. *He doesn't need anything else to worry about.* Riverstorm told herself.

But I have something to do. Riverstorm crossed the camp until she reached Goldenstar's den, she was inside as usual with Ivyheart by her side. "May I come in, Goldenstar?" She called to the leader.

"Of course, Riverstorm." Goldenstar mewed and Riverstorm stepped inside. "What dd you need?"

"I was just out helping my sister collect some herbs. She told me that she and Eagleclaw barely have enough catmint for the Clan, she warned me that we could be facing an incredibly difficult leaf-bare and they won't have the herbs to properly treat the Clan."

A shadow of concern crossed Goldenstar's face. "This is rather concerning." She mewed quietly. "Us warriors can't do much in terms of healing but I say we start working extra hard to keep AshClan strong and healthy." She turned to Ivyheart. "I want you to step up hunting patrols, AshClan is a huge Clan att he moment and we have a lot of strong warriors, we need to get hunting in order. When leaf-bare starts I may have Riverstorm help with patrols again. This way we can be prepared for leaf-bare before it even arrives."

"Understood, Goldenstar." Ivyheart gave the leader a nod of confirmation. "I will start having warriors look for extra catmint as well, just in case."

"Thank you for letting me know, Riverstorm. The sooner we prepare

for this the better, AshClan is the strongest Clan in the entire forest and we will prove it time and time again. Leaf-bare will be a struggle, but I know that we will survive."

"I know, Goldenstar." Riverstorm bowed her head respectfully and stepped out of the den. Despite Goldenstar's motivational words, Riverstorm still felt doubt creep in. Yes, AshClan was strong but sickness proved time and time to be a powerful force, greencough could kill even the strongest warriors.

Riverstorm took a moment to look around the camp, she feared the worst for her Clanmates. *How many lives will greencough take from his this season?* She glanced over her shoulder, back towards the leader's den. *And will Goldenstar be one of them?*

Chapter 36

Moonwhisker's biggest fear had come to life. In an instant, leaf-bare came and raged a storm unlike any other across AshClan and its warriors. The medicine cat den was filled with sick cats, and so was Goldenstar's den. Greencough had reared its ugly head and struck AshClan with a force that she hadn't witnessed in her life. The lives of several cats including Dustclaw, Berryleaf, Oakpaw, Duskwhisker and Ravenfur had already been claimed, with countless more cats sick.

In the medicine cat den was Gorsestrike, Roseclaw, Hazelfern, Mudthorn, Rainsong, Hollytail, Graypelt, Crowpaw and Dustpaw, but they weren't the ones worse off. In Goldenstar's den is where the truly sick cats were, the ones fighting for their lives and their leader was one of them. Along with Goldenstar was Cinderflower, Owlstorm, Featherfall, Grasspaw and Nightpaw. All but three apprentices were sick, and it was a terrifying time for AshClan.

Moonwhisker and Eagleclaw had been working without rest to try and save their Clanmates, but Moonwhisker couldn't help but feel that they were failing miserably. No cats had shown any sign of improvement, and they had ran out of catmint a moon into leaf-bare and they were currently two moons deep into the horrible season.

Ivyheart had taken over the Clan while Goldenstar was confined to her illness-infested den, and Moonwhisker couldn't help but feel that they would lose their leader before the season was over. Moonwhisker went around, checking each of the cats in the medicine cat den, these cats weren't as sick as the ones in the leader's den but their lives were still in danger.

She handed out as much chickweed as she could and gave them water with moss, but she still felt as if there was nothing she could do. Moonwhisker had never felt so hopeless and she knew that Eagleclaw felt the same way.

They hadn't gone to the half-moon meeting since leaf-bare started, neither of them could afford to leave their Clanmates for even a second. They were in dire straights and needed their medicine cat's constant attention. She padded over to Dustpaw, she was most worried about him. He had gotten greencough when he was just a kit which had nearly claimed his life back then. *Please recover.* Moonwhisker prayed silently.

Dustpaw and his siblings probably should've been named warriors already, but the sickness that claimed them left no time for ceremonies. The last ceremony that been preformed was the apprenticeship of Foxpaw. The only one of Dustpaw's siblings that wasn't sick was Batpaw, and his training had taken a momentary pause to help with the Clan.

All warriors were weren't sick were working themselves to exhaustion trying to keep the Clan fed, Moonwhisker knew that both of her sisters were working incredibly hard, as was the rest of AshClan. She had never seen her Clan so desolate, each time she stepped into the camp it was near empty. All warriors either sick or out trying to save their Clan. It was chilling sight every single time.

"How's Mudthorn's fever?" Eagleclaw mewed, suddenly stepping inside the medicine cat den. He spent most of his time in the leader's den caring for the critically ill cats. Moonwhisker stepped over to the brown tabby and touched her muzzle to his forehead.

"Not any better, but it doesn't feel worse. I just gave him more fever few and some water. I'm worried about Dustpaw, he's barely moved in the past two days."

"I'm having Ivyheart send a patrol of healthy warriors to the twolegplace. I want them to tear that place apart until they find catmint I don't care how many kittypets they need to fight to get it."

"We've already--"

"I know we've already sent patrols!" Eagleclaw hissed, then silenced himself. Moonwhisker wasn't scared and didn't take it personally. He was stressed and exhausted, just as she was. "But I need them to look again, I need them to take as much time as possible and bring

back catmint or everyone in that den is going to die!"

"I understand." Moonwhisker dipped her head. "I'm going to focus more on Dustpaw, he may have to move into Goldenstar's den if we're not careful."

"I don't think it will be her den for much longer." Eagleclaw sighed, feeling exhausted. "Goldenstar is barely holding on to her final life, she's not going to make it through the season I can tell. She is weak, she can't eat, we have to be prepared to welcome a new leader into the Clan."

Moonwhisker lowered her head, the loss of Goldenstar would be devastating, especially to Riverstorm. However, Eagleclaw sounded certain and if he was right then Goldenstar would be joining the stars soon. *She had a very long leadership.* Moonwhisker couldn't dwell on that, there were so many cats that needed help.

After gathering more herbs, Eagleclaw returned to the leader's den and Moonwhisker continued working through the day and well into the night treating her patients. She couldn't remember the last time she got a full night of rest, and she wasn't sure when the next one would be. She also couldn't remember the last time she ate.

She was finally taking the time to rest her aching and overworked body when Eagleclaw returned once again, his face one of pure exhaustion. "Cinderflower is dead, and Owlstorm isn't far behind her. Goldenstar is holding on for now, but not much longer."

"What are we supposed to do?" Moonwhisker whimpered, she was starting to feel loss, she had no idea how they were supposed to fight this. "Has the twolegplace patrol returned?"

He shook his head. "Not yet, but soon I hope and with catmint. I have no doubt in my mind that Owlstorm won't survive the night." Moonwhisker stared helplessly at her paws. *We're failing our Clanmates.* "He's as comfortable as he can be, I gave him plenty of poppy seeds to put him to sleep through the pain and his nest is lined with lavender. With any luck, he will pass peacefully in his sleep. There is nothing more that I can do for him."

Eagleclaw sat down, slumping his shoulders. "I'm here so you can get at least a little bit of rest. I'll wake you soon, I'll watch over everyone in here."

"Are you sure?" Moonwhisker asked her mentor. "You need rest too."

"I know, I'll rest after you do. We can take turns. Us walking in circles and wearing our paws into stumps isn't going to do anything right now. I'll wake you if something happens."

"Alright." Moonwhisker bowed her head and curled into her nest, it didn't take any time at all for sleep to overcome her and she slipped into darkness.

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Moonwhisker didn't dream, her sleep was dark and silent. She woke up to a coughing fit and she slowly lifted her head, she could see that it was just barely dawn outside. She blinked the sleep from her eyes and and saw Eagleclaw running his paw up and down Rainsong's back as she suffered a violent coughing attack. After it subsided, the she-cat slipped back into sleep. Moonwhisker sat up and stretched, she didn't feel fully rested but she felt as if she had a little bit of energy. "Did anything happen?"

"I was right about Owlstorm." Eagleclaw replied, looking over to Moonwhisker. She could see the sheer exhaustion in his eyes. "I went to go check on him just a little bit ago, he's in StarClan now."

Moonwhisker lowered her head, having a brief moment of silence for her Clanmate. "You need rest now." She urged her mentor. "I can take it from here, is there anything I should do."

"Go check on Goldenstar for me, if it's that time...." His eyes darkened. "Tell her that even though her and I didn't always get along, it's been an honor serving her as medicine cat."

Moonwhisker nodded and watched as her mentor curled into his nest. Moonwhisker walked over to him and touched her muzzle to his head. "I'm proud of you, Eagleclaw. I couldn't do this without

you." She said it just so he could hear, she knew that her mentor was harsh and stoic, but she could tell he needed to hear those words.

As she stepped back and met his gaze, she could see how much they meant to him. "Get some rest." Once Eagleclaw drifted into sleep, Moonwhisker left the medicine cat den scared of what she find in the leader's den. She stepped into the den and was overwhelmed by the stench of sickness, Owlstorm's body was still in here, resting as if he was asleep.

In the very back of the den was Goldenstar, Moonwhisker crossed the den to her leader and the sight she saw pained her. Her once beautiful golden pelt was dull and beginning to matt, she had lost a dangerous amount of weight and her bones poked out, revealing her ribcage through her pelt.

For a moment Moonwhisker was worried that she wasn't breathing, but she saw the eventual rise and fall of her chest, but it was very slow. Moonwhisker leaned in and touched her muzzle to Goldenstar's forehead, she had an intense fever. The motion seemed to wake the leader up.

Goldenstar's body twitched slightly and her eyes slowly opened, they were dull and void of any life. "Oh, Moonwhisker..." Her voice was dry and lifeless. "It's nice to see you."

"How are you feeling, Goldenstar?" Moonwhisker asked quietly.

"I feel...tired." Goldenstar let out a low sigh. "I think...I think it's time for me to go."

Moonwhisker let out a sigh. "Eagleclaw was worried about this..." She sat down. "I'll stay here with you."

"Thank you, Moonwhisker. You and your sisters turn into fine AshClan cats, I'm proud of you all. Especially Riverstorm."

"We know, Goldenstar. You've been a wonderful leader."

"I wish that Batpaw was able to become a warrior...Riverstorm deserves to be deputy, but I know she will lead this Clan one day. I

trust her."

Moonwhisker laid down next to Goldenstar, she was getting weaker and weaker with each moment. "Eagleclaw wanted me to tell you that even though the two of you haven't always gotten along, its been an honor being your medicine cat."

Goldenstar let out a weak chuckle. "Tell that cranky old badger I'll be waiting for him in StarClan."

Moonwhisker purred. "I will Goldenstar, I promise." The two of them went silent as Goldenstar's energy began to fade, Moonwhisker started rasping her tongue over Goldenstar's ears respectfully, wanting her leader to pass in pure comfort. The silence was loud, and Moonwhisker listened carefully to each of Goldenstar's breaths until she took the final one, it left Moonwhisker feeling cold inside, but the AshClan leader was still.

"May StarClan light your path, Goldenstar." Moonwhisker touched her muzzle to the leader's one last time and rose to her paws. She stepped out of the den, she needed to tell Ivyheart.

She finally spotted the deputy standing near the dwindling fresh-kill pile sending out a patrol, when the patrol left Moonwhisker approached her. "Ivyheart," She spoke, her voice low. The deputy looked at her and seemed to understand right away what had happened. "Goldenstar has joined the ranks of StarClan."

It was clear that Ivyheart needed a moment to recover, she had been incredibly close with the leader. After a few long moments of silence, she regained her composure. "I will tell the Clan when more of our warriors have returned. Thank you so much for your hard work, Moonwhisker. You and Eagleclaw."

"Thank you, Ivyheart." Moonwhisker dipped her head, she returned to the den where she checked on the rest of the inhabitants. When she finished she stepped into the camp to find the twolegplace patrol returning. It had been quite a small patrol led by Riverstorm along with Sharptongue, Heatherstorm, Petalshine and Roseshine. Most importantly they had catmint, and a decent amount.

Moonwhisker rushed up to them. "You found some! Oh thank the stars!" Then Moonwhisker suddenly remembered, she had to tell her sister about Goldenstar. She regained her composure. "Please take it to the medicine cat den, you can wake Eagleclaw if you need to. Riverstorm, I need to talk to you."

Riverstorm's eyes suddenly filled with fear, she of all cats knew just how much danger Goldenstar was in. "Please tell me it's good news."

Moonwhisker sighed and lowered her head. "I'm sorry, Riverstorm. Goldenstar passed away just after dawn."

Disbelief, pain and shock filled Riverstorm's eyes. She shook her head and let out a quiet pained wail. "She--she can't be gone. She's our leader!"

"I'm so sorry, Riverstorm." Moonwhisker mewed quietly. "She said she was very proud of you." Riverstorm shook her head once more, but didn't respond she tore off towards the warrior's den and disappeared inside. *I'm so sorry, Riverstorm.* She wished she could ease her sister's pain, but unfortunately she had to finish her job.

She returned to the medicine cat den and while they didn't have a lot of catmint, they had enough to treat the cats inside the leader's den and give small doses to the cats inside the medicine cat den with a little left to spare. *Is it finally over? We've lost so many cats, including our great leader.*

Once they finished, Moonwhisker returned to the camp and spotted Riverstorm had returned, she was sitting outside the warrior den with grief clouding her eyes. Most of AshClan was back in camp and it was clearly Ivyheart was getting ready to make the announcement. She reached the center of camp and raised her voice. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!" Moonwhisker watched from the medicine cat den as the weakened Clan gathered around their future leader. "I make this announcement with a great pain in my heart, that our beloved Goldenstar has joined the ranks of StarClan."

There was a long moment of silence among AshClan cats mourned the loss of their leader. Moonwhisker had known nothing but

Goldenstar her entire life, but she looked at the way Ivyheart spoke and held herself. *She will be a great leader.* "Goldenstar was one of my most treasured friends. I personally will miss her dearly but I will do my absolute best to honor her legacy as the new leader of AshClan."

"Ivyheart! Ivyheart!" The cats of AshClan cheered for their new leader, they were clearly trying to channel all of their energy into cheering for their new leader. This had been the hardest leaf-bare that AshClan had seen in a long time, Moonwhisker felt broken and exhausted but with Ivyheart as their leader, she had to trust that they would not only recover, but return stronger than ever.

Chapter 37

Leaf-bare had left its mark on AshClan, leaving a horrible wound that was taking moons to heal. Riverstorm felt the wound burning every single day, the loss of Goldenstar had completely torn her apart. She hadn't been able to full recover from the leader's death and missed her dearly. Goldenstar had been the best leader that AshClan had ever seen, and Riverstorm wasn't adjusting well.

The rest of the Clan, however, was finally recovering from the brutal and unforgiving season that had threatened to tear the Clan apart. Sickness had spread like a wild fire, almost every single cat in the Clan had caught at least whitecough before the season ended, but Eagleclaw and Moonwhisker had worked hard to keep their Clanmates safe and the sickness grew weaker and weaker as time went on.

It had been nearly four moons since the death of the Goldenstar and Riverstorm still felt the loss fresh in her mind. The Clan was now led by Ivystar with Jayclaw as her deputy, Riverstorm felt a bitter taste of resentment towards the new leader, something she was trying to fight. When nearly all of the apprentices had gotten sick, including all of Batpaw's siblings, his training had to be put on hold.

There had been no time for training as Riverstorm had been working hard to keep the Clan fed, as had Batpaw. His siblings took a very long time to recover and Batpaw had requested not to be made a warrior without his siblings. Because of this, Riverstorm had been unable to become deputy when Ivystar became leader. *I didn't want to go against Batpaw's wishes.* However it still burned like a flame under her pelt. *But I should be deputy right now.*

She had to get Batpaw's training back on track and she hoped that today would be the day. She padded swiftly over to the medicine cat den where she found Moonwhisker and Eagleclaw inside. The den was nearly empty with only Featherfall remaining. "Good morning, Riverstorm." Moonwhisker mewed upon seeing her sister. "What can I help you with?"

"Do you know if Batpaw's siblings are ready to resume their training? They should've been made warriors a while ago."

Moonwhisker thought for a moment. "I checked on them a while ago and Crowpaw and Nightpaw should be good to go, Dustpaw is still having some breathing issues but getting out in the forest and getting his body moving should be helpful. I'll go ahead and let their mentors know and you should be good."

"Thank you, Moonwhisker." Riverstorm let out a sigh of relief, glad she could finally get Batpaw back on training. She figured maybe a moon of catching up then she would talk to Ivystar about making him a warrior. *It's about time.* Riverstorm left the medicine cat den and waited for Moonwhisker to inform the other mentors.

It took longer than she wanted but once the medicine cat was done, Riverstorm hurried over to where Batpaw was sharing fresh-kill with Dustpaw. "Batpaw." She called out to her apprentice. "Moonwhisker has cleared your siblings to go do some training, are you ready to get back out there?"

Batpaw's eyes lit up with pure excitement and he jumped to his paws. "Of course I am! It feels like I've been an apprentice forever!" He wasn't wrong, he and his siblings had been training for nearly seven moons, it was time for them to become warriors.

"Riverstorm!" Batpaw noticed Gorsestrike padding up to her and the two apprentices. "If you're taking Batpaw out, do you mind if Dustpaw and I go with you?" Dustpaw's original mentor had been Owlstorm, but after the tom passed away he had been assigned to Gorsestrike.

"Sure, that's fine with me." Riverstorm didn't particularly enjoy training with other cats, but she knew that Batpaw enjoyed training with siblings so she put up with it from time to time. "I was planning on taking Batpaw hunting, possibly near the SunClan border."

"Sounds good." Gorsestrike gave an affirming nod. "Lead the way."

Riverstorm nodded and with the three cats behind her, ventured out

into the forest. The day was so lovely it was hard to tell that just a few moons prior AshClan had been suffering at the fate of leaf-bare. She let out a sigh as she glanced up towards the sky, her heart once again aching as she thought about Goldenstar.

Riverstorm had gone out on a patrol to find more catmint in the twolegplace and they had been successful, but they had been too late for Goldenstar. Riverstorm found it hard not to blame herself and wonder what could've been done if she had gotten there a day earlier. She had talked to Moonwhisker and her sister had told her that there was a very slim chance that Goldenstar could have been saved, but at least it would have been a chance, and Riverstorm couldn't let that go.

She found herself drifting off into thought, but managed to pull herself back when she caught scent of the SunClan border. She stopped herself and refocused on the world around her. They were near the river and she could hear voices in the distance, SunClan warriors. "Oh, what's that?" She heard Batpaw speak and the energetic apprentice ran off into the trees.

"Batpaw! Slow down!" Riverstorm called after her apprentice, wondering just how he could be so careless. *I guess it has been a while since he trained.* Riverstorm followed her apprentice along with Dustpaw and Gorsestrike as they reached the river. Batpaw was inspecting a large platform of built up moss and sticks floating in the river. "That looks cool! I wanna play on it!" *Play? You are almost a warrior!*

Riverstorm suddenly became aware that they were not alone as she spotted Tallfern and Flowerpelt of SunClan along with a young she-cat. "Oh, hi there." Her pelt burned, she felt slightly embarrassed. "Sorry about him he's....energetic."

"It's quiet alright." Tallfern purred with amusement. "Berrypaw here is energetic as well." Riverstorm felt oddly comforted by Tallfern's demeanor.

"This is Batpaw, my apprentice and that's Dustpaw, Gorsestrike's apprentice." Riverstorm introduced her Clanmates. She felt slightly strange being so friendly to SunClan, but it still felt...nice. *It's fine to*

be friendly to other Clans. She reminded herself.

"It's great to meet you!" Berrypaw exclaimed and ran forward, coming to a stop at the border. "I'm learning how to hunt birds! Did you see my awesome catch?" Her eyes were sparkling and Riverstorm noticed that Batpaw's attention was focused on the SunClan apprentice, they seemed very similar. Both Tallfern and Flowerpelt, as well as Gorsestrike seemed entertained by the apprentices. *I suppose Batpaw has had a very stressful few moons, I can let him relax a little.*

"What's going on here?" Riverstorm heard a new voice and noticed that they had been joined by the SunClan medicine cat Feathernose, he didn't look upset just a bit confused.

"We're just talking with Riverstorm, Gorsestrike and their apprentices." Tallfern explained to the tom.

Feathernose just shrugged. "I have no problem with it, I'm just here for the fennel that grows by the river." He brushed past the two SunClan she-cats and went to collect his herbs. Riverstorm noticed that Batpaw had once again turned his attention back to the floating bundle of wood.

"Riverstorm can I *please* play on that?" Batpaw urged, his eyes pleading. "I bet it will hold my weight."

"I don't know, Batpaw." She looked at it warily. "It's nearly on SunClan territory.

Feathernose looked up from his fennel and padded over to the platform. "This thing?" He gave it a gentle poke with his forepaw. "We don't own the river. Let me see." He stepped up onto the platform which wobbled from the current, but easily supported his weight. "It seems to be steady, but its up to your mentor." Feathernose gracefully jumped off the bundle and back into SunClan territory.

"I wanna play on it too!" Dustpaw announced. "If it can hold Feathernose than it can for sure hold us!" Riverstorm looked at Gorsestrike, he seemed to be more relaxed than she was. He gave

her a small nod.

"Very well, Batpaw. Just be careful." She instructed her apprentice. Batpaw and Dustpaw hurried over to the platform and climbed on top, they were laughing and clearly having a good time.

"Can I join them?" Berrypaw questioned Tallfern. "I'm even smaller than they are!" She pleaded. Riverstorm noticed Tallfern looking at her. *She wants me to approve this.*

"I don't see why not." Riverstorm replied. *It's just some harmless fun.* "Just because we're from two different Clans doesn't mean we have to be at each other's throat all the time." Riverstorm was surprised at herself, even just a few seasons ago she would refuse to do anything with another Clan. She really had changed, and she felt like she could attribute it to Batpaw. *But still. What would Goldenstar think of this?*

"Then off you go." Tallfern nudged her apprentice forward and Berrypaw joined the two AshClan apprentices, while they played Riverstorm noticed Flowerpelt looking at her, she turned to face her.

"So how's the prey running in AshClan?" She questioned.

"It's great." Riverstorm purred, she knew the Clans knew how much AshClan had struggled during leaf-bare, she needed to make sure that the other Clans knew they were strong once again. *Even without Goldenstar.*

"Also great," Tallfern replied. "Prey is more than plentiful and we have a den full of apprentices."

"That's always good to hear." Gorsestrike added. "Apprentices certainly bring a lot of joy to the Clan, especially energetic ones." He cast a glance at Batpaw.

"Tell me about it." Tallfern let out a laugh and rolled her eyes. "I can't keep up with Berrypaw, she has more energy than I ever did."

As they spoke a sudden cry split the air and Riverstorm's head snapped towards the apprentices. The bundle of wood and moss

broke apart and all three apprentices fell into the river. Dustpaw managed to cling into a large piece of wood, Batpaw was desperately trying to stay above the water but Berrypaw slipped under the surface immediately.

Before Riverstorm or any other cat could move, Feathernose dived into the river he appeared a moment later with Berrypaw who was unconscious, he threw his weight towards Batpaw but the apprentice slipped beneath the surface.

Riverstorm got to her paws and raced towards the river. *No!* She cried internally as the apprentices and medicine cat were carried away. Gorsestrike reached the river and grabbed the piece of wood, helping Dustpaw out of the water, but Batpaw was still under.

Riverstorm dove into the water as Feathernose and Batpaw were dragged beneath the surface. Water surged around her eye, she forced her eyes open ignoring the burning as she tried to find the two of them. She forced herself to swim against the current, she saw Feathernose's lighter pelt through the murk, and eventually saw the dark shape of Batpaw.

She went for her apprentice, grabbing his scruff in her teeth. He was complete dead weight and his pelt clogged with water. She desperately tried to swim towards the surface, she was panicking and running out of breath.

Her head broke the surface and she spotted Tallfern in the river with Berrypaw as well. Riverstorm set Batpaw on the bank of the river as Gorsestrike ran to his side. She looked at Tallfern and knew they had to go back for Feathernose.

Riverstorm took another deep breath and dove back into the river with the SunClan she-cat, the two of them swam against the current until they reached Feathernose's body. Using their collective weights they lifted Feathernose off the riverbed and forced him back up to the surface. His weight was almost too much and Riverstorm's lungs burned, but she pressured forward.

She seemed to be in the river forever until they finally broke through the surface. Riverstorm noticed a branch that Gorsestrike

had placed and she sunk her claws into it, using it to pull herself, Tallfern and Feathernose to the riverbank. The two of them heaved Feathernose up onto the ground and Riverstorm took just a moment to catch her breath, she was shivering and her entire body felt weak.

Then she noticed Batpaw, the apprentice was unmoving and eerily still while Gorsestrike pressed on his chest, trying to get the water out of his lungs. *No.* Riverstorm rushed over to her apprentice and stared at him in shock.

"She's not breathing." Tallfern mewed in a panic. "Oh, StarClan no!" *This can't be happening. This can't be real.* She looked over at Feathernose who had Flowerpelt at his side, the medicine cat wasn't moving either and Flowerpelt looked horrified. Riverstorm turned her attention back to Batpaw, her heart shattering in her chest as she finally realized what had happened. *He's dead.*

Her legs gave out and she buried her muzzle into Batpaw's soaked fur. "Batpaw..." She whimpered. "This is all my fault...I never should've let you go on there...I'm so sorry..." She slowly lifted her head, feeling everything about her shatter inside. "Berrypaw...Feathernose...Batpaw.." She whimpered. "I'm so sorry...your medicine cat and apprentice are dead because of me."

She barely noticed Tallfern standing up, she could see that she was feeling the exact same was as Riverstorm, the light in her eyes had been snuffed out in an instant by the unforgiving river. "It's not your fault, Riverstorm." Tallfern learned forward and touched her nose to Riverstorm's, she could both their bodies trembling. "They were just being apprentices, Feathernose died trying to save them...it's not your fault."

Riverstorm couldn't handle it anymore, she fell against the SunClan she-cat and let out a wail of anguish. *I failed you Batpaw. I promised to make you into a strong warrior and I failed you. I'm so sorry.*

Riverstorm stayed like that for a long time, until Gorsestrike helped her back to her paws. She painfully lifted Batpaw onto her back while a horrified Dustpaw leaned against his mentor. The two of them started the long journey back to their camp, Riverstorm wasn't

sure she could face her Clanmates.

When they arrived back at camp they were met with horrified warriors. "What in the name of StarClan happened?" Lilyclaw questioned as she looked at the four cats in horror. "Is Batpaw..?"

"Please go get Mousetail...ne needs to know." Mousetail had lost his mate Ravenfur to greencough just a few moons earlier, and now he had to face his dead son. Riverstorm set Batpaw's body down, her heart shattering even further as she looked at him.

Mousetail came sprinting from the warrior's den and stopped at Batpaw's body, most of the Clan had realized something was going on and the attention of Nightpaw and Crowpaw had been grabbed as well. The two apprentices ran over to their sibling, eyes wide with horror. "What happened?" Mousetail asked, his voice cracking.

"They were playing by the river and Batpaw fell in, we were also with some SunClan cats near the border. Feathernose tried to save him and Berrypaw, but all three were killed." There was a long moment of silence and Riverstorm couldn't bring herself to speak. She felt completely broken inside, she walked slowly away from Batpaw's body to let his family grieve and sat alone by the warrior's den.

A few moments later she was approached by Echoheart. She looked down up at her sister, and found her gaze unwelcoming. It wasn't sympathetic, it was cold and empty. "So Batpaw's dead." Her words stung.

"Yeah." She lowered her head in shame, she couldn't stand to look in Echoheart's eyes any longer.

"I was told that you let him, Berrypaw and Dustpaw play on some weird platform in the river."

Riverstorm nodded. "Yes..." She mewed weekly. "It's my fault."

"It really is, isn't it?" Riverstorm's head shot up to look at Echoheart as the words left her mouth. "I always warned you that your recklessness would get someone killed, too bad it was Batpaw and

not you." Riverstorm's eyes went wide. *How can she say that? We're supposed to be sisters.*

"Echoheart I--"

"What?" Echoheart tilted her head, her expression unchanging. "Did you expect me to come here here and feel sorry for you? After everything you've done to me, all the horrible things you said? It doesn't feel so good to be treated like this by someone who is supposed to care for you, does it?" For a brief moment her eyes filled with his hatred, but she turned and walked away.

Riverstorm was left feeling an unstoppable agony in her chest, Echoheart was right. *I destroyed our relationship and I killed Batpaw, Berrypaw and Feathernose.* She slowly lifted her head towards the sky. *Goldenstar I am a failure. I don't deserve to be leader. I should've been the one to die in that river.*

Chapter 38

Many moons had passed since the worst day of Riverstorm's life, since her beloved apprentice drowned because of her own actions. A lot in AshClan had changed since then, they had lost Windheart and Rainsong to greencough as well as the two elders Sandnose and Cinderclaw. Heatherstorm, Gorsestrike and Roseclaw had all retired and now resided in the den in their absence. Batpaw's siblings, Nightstorm, Duststorm and Crowstep had all earned their warrior names along with Foxfeather. They currently had no apprentices, but Nightstorm was in the nursery with a belly of kits and Petalshine and Featherfall were as close as every.

AshClan was thriving but there was a hollow ache that stuck with Riverstorm, she was starting to think that his ache would never go away. After Batpaw's death she secluded herself, she didn't talk to as many of her Clanmates, she still worked hard but she felt broken inside, she didn't know what else she could do. She had failed so many cats, she had failed her sisters, Goldenstar and most importantly Batpaw who paid the ultimate price for her foolishness.

She lived her life quietly, not wanting to do anything else to hurt someone she was supposed to love. Echoheart was doing the complete opposite of Riverstorm, she seemed to have taken her place. She had many friends and was a well respected warrior. Riverstorm couldn't even look her Clanmates in the eyes half the time, let alone Batpaw's family.

She sat alone outside the warriors den trying to eat, something that had become quite the struggle for her, but she pushed through for her Clan. She spotted her father stepping out of Ivystar's den seemingly to organize patrols, and Riverstorm figured she should join them. After forcing down the rest of her prey she padded over to the group of her Clanmates that were gathered.

"Alright for the first hunting patrol I want it led by Lilyclaw, take Echoheart, Foxfeather and Petalshine with you. I will be leading a patrol near the SunClan border and I will be taking Lionpelt,

Riverstorm, Duststorm and Hollytail." As he listed off the other patrols for the day Riverstorm shuddered at the thought of return to the SunClan border, every single time she went there she fought the urge to have a panic attack.

"Let's get going, we're wasting daylight." Jayclaw mewed and the patrol set off. Riverstorm hung near the back and tried to avoid talking to everyone else. However she noticed Lionpelt falling behind to walk beside her.

"I've been worried about you." He said quietly. "Ever since Batpaw's death you've been completely isolated, I thought it would wear off after a few moons but it hasn't."

"How could I feel any better?" Riverstorm sighed, she was tired of hiding how much pain she was in. "I failed my apprentice and he died because of me."

"You can't blame yourself forever, you didn't drown Batpaw. It's not your fault, Riverstorm."

She shook her head slowly. "I can't change my mind about that. I wanted nothing more than to be an amazing warrior, to someday lead this Clan and be a perfect leader like Goldenstar."

"My mother *wasn't* perfect." Lionpelt sighed. "Goldenstar was reckless, she started pointless battles just to flex her power. She didn't care me or my sister, she only cared about being a leader. She wasn't a terrible leader but she was far from perfect, she was a terrible mother. I don't hate her, but she shouldn't be your sole idol. You can still become leader someday, you just shouldn't hold yourself to her standard, be your *own* cat, Riverstorm."

Riverstorm looked at Lionpelt, she had always idolized Goldenstar. In her eyes she was the perfect warrior, strong, brave and loyal but deep down Riverstorm knew that Lionpelt was right. *She still did so much for me. I miss her dearly, and I want to honor her someday.* Riverstorm let out a sigh, she had a lot more thinking to do. Her mind was a raging storm of pain and confusion, she didn't want to focus on it right now. "Thanks, Lionpelt." She thanked her friend and returned her focus to the patrol.

They were nearing the SunClan border when a strange, foul scent washed over the patrol. "What is that?" Duststorm raised his muzzle, sniffing the air.

"Rats." Jayclaw mewed, also breathing in the scent. "We're nearing the old twoleg nest, sometimes it gets overrun with rats. We should go check it out, but do not engage unless I say so." He started leading the patrol off their path.

"They're just rats, why can't we just drive them out?"

"One or two rats its prey, but a whole swarm of rats can easily kill a full grown warrior." Jayclaw warned. "Stay quiet and stay alert."

They padded through the pine trees until the old twolegnest came into view, it was completely broken down with splintered wood. It smelled horribly of crowfood and rats. Riverstorm noticed her father slowly creeping forwards, she could see a few tiny bodies moving through the grass, there didn't seem to be many but the smell was too strong for just the ones she saw.

"We can take them." Duststorm mewed, flexing his claws. "It's just some rats."

"What did I just--" Before Jayclaw could finish his statement, Duststorm ran forward towards one of the rats with a hiss. He killed the rat quickly, but in a split second countless rats began spilling out of the twolegnest, Riverstorm's eyes went wide as they attacked the young warrior. He howled in pain and started flinging them off.

"AshClan!" Jayclaw roared. "Get Duststorm out of there and run!" The patrol charged forward, running to Duststorm's aid. Riverstorm swatted at the rats that climbed his body and sank their filthy teeth into his flesh. Riverstorm felt tiny teeth and claws piercing her pelt as she flipped around to knock the rats back.

"We need to run!" Lionpelt called. "There's too many!" Riverstorm tried running but the rats were overwhelming as they tore into the AshClan patrol. She spotted Jayclaw, covered in more rats than fur, blood poured from several wounds. "Get to the river! Now! Just run!"

Riverstorm broke into a run, trying to ignore the biting rats and charged down towards the river. The rest of the patrol was behind her and without thinking she jumped into the river. The rats were quickly overwhelmed and let go as several of them were swept away. The current wasn't very strong today, but it would prove to be too much for the rats. Her Clanmates did the same, but Jayclaw was lagging behind the rest of them. She and Lionpelt got out of the river and rushed to her father were they were able to remove the remainder of the rats that clung to his pelt.

His pelt was laced with countless bloody bite marks and his eyes were dull and exhausted. Riverstorm and Lionpelt worked together to hold Jayclaw up as they helped him back to camp. It was a long walk, her pelt burned with several wounds. The rest of the patrol looked the same, covered in bite marks but Jayclaw was by far the worst. She did noticed Duststorm was limping heavily as he had a massive wound on his leg. *Why did he run ahead?* Riverstorm wondered. *How could he be so mouse-brained?*

They reached camp at long last and were swarmed by Clanmates asking what happened. The injured patrol made their way to the medicine cat den where Eagleclaw instantly began treating Jayclaw. Riverstorm watched her father fall into a nest as he bled out into the moss. Moonwhisker was clearly distressed about their father but started treating Duststorm's wound.

After a few moments, Ivystar appeared in the den. "What happened?" She demanded.

"We were on patrol when we caught the scent of rats. Jayclaw led us to go investigate but Duststorm ran ahead and started a fight. We were instantly overwhelmed by rats and had to flee."

Ivystar turned to Duststorm, her eyes ablaze with anger. "Why on earth did you run forward like that? You do realize that Jayclaw is your deputy?" Her voice grew louder. "He could *die* because of your careless actions!" Riverstorm winced, once again thinking back to Batpaw. *Why didn't I get scolded when Batpaw died?* Duststorm hung his head in shame and Ivystar let out a sigh. "We will discuss this later, come see me when you've been treated." The leader turned out of the medicine cat den and left the injured cats to be treated.

After Duststorm had been treated Moonwhisker went by treating each cat and stopping at Riverstorm. "Are you alright?" She questioned, her eyes filled with concern.

"I will be." Riverstorm replied quietly. "Don't worry." She didn't want Moonwhisker to worry about her, this was the one relationship she didn't manage to ruin and she wasn't going to do that now.

"Moonwhisker get over here and help me." Eagleclaw suddenly snapped and Moonwhisker was over by her mentor in the blink of eye as they worked on Jayclaw. *Something is wrong.* Between the two medicine cats she could see that his moss was soaked with blood, and it wasn't stopping. *Oh Jayclaw.* Her heart ached for her father. *Please don't take him from us yet.*

The rest of the cats in the medicine cat den watched helplessly as the two medicine cats worked hard on Jayclaw. After what seemed like an eternity, Eagleclaw let out a long, pained sigh and Moonwhisker lowered her head in defeat. *He's gone.* Riverstorm wasn't sure what to feel, her heart began to ache. *Jayclaw was a brave and resilient warrior. He died a warrior's death.* She glanced at Duststorm who was hiding his face. *But one that could've been easily avoided.*

"Moonwhisker is he...?" Riverstorm's voice was barely above a whisper.

Moonwhisker looked at Riverstorm with pain in her eyes. "He's with Mistypool now. I'm sorry."

"This is all my fault." Duststorm whimpered. "I need to go see Ivystar, I need to face my punishment." No one stopped him as the pale brown tom rose to his paws and left the medicine cat den. Moonwhisker walked over and Riverstorm leaned against her sister as they shared a moment of silence for their father.

When they finished and Riverstorm was cleared, she stepped out into the camp. News of Jayclaw's death hadn't spread quite yet and she assumed that Duststorm was still speaking with Ivystar. Riverstorm spotted Echoheart sitting alone and figured that she

should know as well, even if the two of them hadn't really spoken since Echoheart told Riverstorm she should've been the one to die in the river.

Riverstorm reluctantly walked up to her sister who turned to face her with the same bland expression she always had. "Our father is dead." She reported solemnly. Echoheart just stared at Riverstorm, her expression not shifting even a whisker.

"Who is the new deputy going to be?"

Riverstorm's fur stood on edge slightly as she felt a small spark of anger. "Our father is dead, do you even care?"

"Why should I?" Echoheart shrugged. "He treated me like crowfood most of my life and was never actually a father to me. You can go mourn him all you want, I couldn't care less." Riverstorm was honestly shocked at Echoheart's blatant disregard for their father's life. She didn't even know what to say. *Whoever that is...that's not the Echoheart I know.*

The Echoheart she remembered was a kind and loyal she-cat, but she had clearly changed. *Is it my fault that she's like this? I treated her so poorly...* Riverstorm didn't know what else to say, she just turned around and walked away from her sister. *There is no chance of a friendship between us.*

Riverstorm slowly shook her head, then spotted movement as Ivystar and a very ashamed Duststom left the leader's den. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!" The leader's call rang out throughout the forest and Riverstorm gathered with the rest of the Clan. Echoheart joined, but she sat apart from the rest of the cats. "I come bearing terrible news of the death of our deputy Jayclaw. He was a powerful, dedicated and loyal warrior and I was proud to call him my deputy." She glared down at Duststorm.

"This was a death that could have easily been avoided. Duststorm started this fight when he was told not to and it resulted in the death of his deputy. This was not my decision, but his. Duststorm, so you may never forget the reckless and lethal mistake you made, I

will be changing your warrior name." *Changing his warrior name?* Riverstorm stared in shock. "Spirits of StarClan, you know every cat by name. I ask you now to take away the name from the cat you see before you, for it no longer stands for what he is. By my authority as Clan leader, and with the approval of our warrior ancestors, I give this cat a new name. From this moment on he will be known as Ratpelt."
There was no cheering as Ratpelt hung his head in shame and stepped away from the crowd. "As for the next order of business, I must name my new deputy." Ivystar took a deep breath. "I had considered this cat when I first became leader, but now I see him as the best option to someday lead this Clan. "I say these words before the spirit of Jayclaw so he may hear and approve my choice, Lionpelt will be the new deputy of AshClan!"

Lionpelt stepped forward, but didn't seem surprised. *Did he know that she would pick him.* Regardless, Riverstorm couldn't help but feel a sense of pride as she looked at her friend. *He will make a fine leader someday, it will be an honor to serve him.*

"My mother was leader before, and while I didn't always agree with her I hope she is proud of me today and I will do my best to honor Jayclaw's memory."

"Lionpelt! Lionpelt! Lionpelt!' AshClan cheered their new deputy and Riverstorm did as well. She couldn't help but feel like time was rushing so quickly by her, everything was changing so quickly and she still felt a part of her was forever broken. *I can't let Batpaw's death drag me down forever, I will try and be strong. For him.*

Chapter 39

Time moved so quickly for Riverstorm, she felt as if she had no control over the days that passed. She was simply just trying to live her life as the best AshClan warrior she could be, honoring the memories of those she had lost over time. Goldenstar, Batpaw as well as her father. The Clan was strong and powerful, many seasons had passed since Lionpelt stepped into the role as deputy and the Clan was at peace, a few border skirmishes here and there, but the Clan was strong as it ever was.

Ivystar was well respected, she had lived a long leadership but Riverstorm also knew that she had already lost many of lives. She had lost one of them to a badger attack and another to the mission to drive out the rats. They had been successful but at the cost of one of Ivystar's lives as well as the lives of both Roseshine and Blossomheart. Lionpelt had been absolutely devastated to lose both his daughters at once, but he remained strong.

Riverstorm had stayed by his side during that horrible time and helped him with his deputy duties. She had never seen a cat look more broken than Lionpelt during that time, after he had already lost his beloved Rainsong as well. She had been there to support him, and he eventually found his strength once again.

Riverstorm had yet to take another apprentice as they didn't have any. AshClan hadn't seen any new kits since Foxfeather as Nightstorm had lost her first litter of kits. Shadowkit and Pinekit had passed away before they ever had a chance to live. The poor queen had been devastated, but eventually found her strength and returned to warrior duties.

Riverstorm wondered if she would have more kits, but she didn't seem to keen on it yet, she had mostly returned to her normal life as an AshClan warrior. Riverstorm truly hoped that there would be more kits soon as their apprentice den had been empty since Foxfeather became a warrior. She wasn't in a rush to get a new apprentice, not yet anyway, she just wanted the Clan she loved so

much to be strong.

Riverstorm and Echoheart's relationship had only worsened over time, her sister felt like a stranger. She was cold, distant and Riverstorm knew deep down that their relationship would never be fixed. *Part of it is my fault, yes.* Riverstorm knew, but the complete lack of emotion that Echoheart showed when their father had passed scared Riverstorm, her sister had become the empty shell of a cat she used to be.

She worried that Echoheart would feel this way forever, but she also knew that Echoheart would not care of Riverstorm herself died, she wasn't even sure Echoheart would care if Moonwhisker died. As Riverstorm thought more about it, she couldn't recall Echoheart showing much emotion when Mistypool died. The only cat that she had ever cared about dying was her former mentor Ripplestep. *She's a disturbed cat, and its not my job to fix it.*

Riverstorm just had to accept how their relationship was, because it wasn't changing. It was best if Riverstorm no longer considered Echoheart her sister at all. She was just another Clanmate, nothing more and nothing less.

Riverstorm rose from her resting spot near the warrior's den and decided to try and get on a patrol. She padded over to Lionpelt who was sending them out for the day. "Spiderheart you will lead the LichenClan border patrol, take Lilyclaw, Graypelt, Sharptongue and Foxfeather with you. Cloverstrike you'll lead the SunClan border patrol with Ratpelt, Hazelfern, Mousetail and Echoheart. Finally I'm sending out two hunting patrols for now. First one will hunt in the back of the territory and will be led by Mudthorn. Take Leafwind, Featherfall and Hollytail. The last hunting patrol will be led by Petalshine, take Crowstep, Grasstail and Harewhisker with you. That's all."

No patrols for me? Riverstorm wondered. Once the Clan cats had set out on their tasks, Riverstorm approached the deputy. "Is there something you needed me to do? Or do I just get no patrols today."

Lionpelt shook his head. "There's something that Ivystar wants you for, both of us actually."

Riverstorm tilted her head. "What is it?"

"Not sure exactly, she just asked me to keep you for the day. We can go talk to her now." Riverstorm followed Lionpelt into Ivystar's den and they stepped inside.

"Welcome, Riverstorm." Ivystar greeted, dipping her head. "Are patrols all organized?" Lionpelt and Riverstorm both sat down, facing their leader. "Yesterday's patrol caught scent of a rogue near the twolegplace and its been appearing quite frequently. I want to go an investigate so we can warn this rogue off of our territory."

"Alright." Riverstorm nodded, she was sure that the three of them could handle a rogue. "When are we leaving?"

"I'd prefer to leave right now." Ivystar mewed. "As long as the two of you are ready."

"I'm ready." Lionpelt confirmed.

"Me too." Riverstorm nodded in agreement.

"Then let's leave." Ivystar mewed. "We don't want to waste anytime." Both warriors followed their leader out of the den and left the camp, heading towards the back end of the territory.

Ivystar's leadership had been a peaceful one, she wasn't Goldenstar but Riverstorm respected her as a leader, just as she had when she had been deputy as the two of them had worked very together often. She wasn't as quick to fight as Goldenstar was, she wasn't on a mission to prove AshClan's strength and this had AshClan in an era of peace, even if she hadn't been leader for very long.

Riverstorm looked at Ivystar curiously. *I wonder how many lives she has left.* She wasn't nearly as close to Ivystar as she was Goldenstar, so she didn't know just how many lives Ivystar had, but she was sure that it wasn't very many. She glanced over at Lionpelt who walked with his head. *If she does die soon, I know that Lionpelt will make a wonderful leader. He won't be anything like Goldenstar, but that's okay.*

They traversed AshClan territory until they started getting closer to

the twolegplace. "Spread out and start trying to scent out the rogue. If you happen to come across the rogue try and avoid a fight. If you're unable to avoid one then drive them out of the territory. Remember that rogues are not protected by the warrior code."

Riverstorm and Lionpelt nodded and she started padding away, trying to scent out the rogue. She caught a few scents, a faint scent of an old patrol, the scent of a mouse but no strange cat scents. She tracked it closer to the abandoned twoleg nest, making sure to keep her distance. The rats had been driven out, but they could always come back and she wasn't about to face them alone.

She skirted around the twolegnest, not finding any scent of the rogue so she started venturing back to the twolegplace. She padded through the pine trees until she came across the very faint scent of rogue. She continued walking as the scent trail grew stronger and stronger, but still slightly weak.

The rogue was definitely here at some point. She told herself. *But it is very faint and weak.* She twitched her tail, she figured she should find Lionpelt and Ivystar and see if they found anything. She stepped away from the scent trail of the rogue and started tracking her Clanmates.

She caught the trail of Lionpelt first and started tacking him. He had ventured towards the center of the twolegplace and it didn't take long for her to locate his golden tabby pelt. "Were you able to find anything?" She questioned once stepping into view.

Lionpelt shook his head. "Nothing but a stale scent unfortunately. We should go meet up with Ivystar." Riverstorm agreed and the two of them began tracking Ivystar's scent. They were padding closer to the LichenClan border and Riverstorm started to grow slightly anxious. *Why did Ivystar come this far?* She could tell that Lionpelt was getting nervous as well.

As they followed her trail Riverstorm also caught scent of the rogue, but this time it was stronger. *He's been here recently.* Riverstorm felt a sense of urgency as both she and Lionpelt started hurrying towards the scent of the rogue.

The rouge's scent soon overpowered Ivystar's and Riverstorm noticed movement in the distance. "Stop!" She called sharply and the rogue froze in place. She and Lionpelt approached him, he was lean dark gray tabby tom with piercing yellow eyes.

"How many more of you Clan cats do I have to deal with." He groaned as he turned to face Lionpelt and Riverstorm. "I'm no longer in the mood to play."

Riverstorm glared at him, but noticed right away that he had splashe of blood on him, and though they were mostly hidden by the grass his paws were soaked in blood, Lionpelt noticed it too. "If you harmed our leader I can promise you that you will regret it."

"I wasn't scared of her and I'm not scared of you." He flicked his ears. "Plus, she's already been taken care of."

"What do you mean?" Riverstorm demanded.

"She told me to leave, I told her that no cat can own the forest and she attacked me so I defended myself. Too bad she was old and I beat her pretty easily actually. If you get to her fast maybe you can see her before she dies." Riverstorm's eyes went wide and she looked at Lionpelt.

"Go find Ivystar, I'll deal with him." Riverstorm told him and Lionpelt took off into the forest to find their leader.

"Deal with me?" The rogue flicked his tail. "I'm already leaving, what are you gonna do? Chase me out for fun."

"I'll make you pay for hurting my leader!"

He let out an annoyed sigh. "You Clan cats are always so drawn to your leaders, why do you let some cat lead you in the first place."

"You don't know the first thing about Clan life." Riverstorm hissed. "You're just some flea-bitten rogue."

He rolled his eyes. "I know enough, you Clan cats are just so pretentious and full of yourselves. You think that you own this forest when in reality you don't. Most rogues and loners are just too

scared of you to wander into your lands because you bully them if they don't leave. Well guess what, your leader tried to force me to leave and I fought for my life and won. That's how life is, suck it up."

Riverstorm let out a yowl and launched herself forward, her body slamming into the rogue's. She hissed in rage and sank her teeth deep into his shoulder and battered her claws against his chest. The rogue fought back instantly, he drove his hind legs deep into her stomach.

Riverstorm hissed but withheld the attack and sank her teeth deeper into his shoulder. She latched her claws into his lank and pressed them as deep as she could into his flesh, feeling blood flow out from around the wounds.

The rouge struggled under her grip and flung his paw towards her head. His claws connected with the side of her face and he raked his claws down. Riverstorm had no choice but to let go and pull back to avoid the tom clawing her eye. She let go and leapt back, hissing as she felt blood pour down the side of her face.

"You're already stronger than the other one." The rogue laughed. "But I don't feel like killing another cat today, I'll be leaving." The rogue ran off but Riverstorm gave chase, she wanted to make sure he left their territory. The rogue was incredibly fast even with his wounded shoulder.

The two of them eventually reached the edge of the twolegplace where he vanished inside. "Don't ever come back!" Riverstorm howled, she had won that fight and she hoped that the rogue would never return. *I need to go find Ivystar and Lionpelt.* Riverstorm turned around and rushed back to where she had been before, tracking Lionpelt and Ivystar's scent.

It took her quite a while to locate the two of them, but when she did she was overwhelmed by the scent of blood. She came to a stop and spotted Lionpelt through the trees. He was sitting with his shoulders slumped, in front of him was Ivystar, her body unmoving and bloody. *There's no way that was her last life.*

"Lionpelt?" She mewed, her voice quiet.

"She didn't stand a chance." Lionpelt muttered, his voice broken.

Riverstorm padded up to him, she looked at Ivystar, her silver tabby pelt was laced in deep wounds and her body completely still. "She hasn't been leader for very long, is she really all out of lives?"

"She was sick." Lionpelt replied, she could see that his eyes were glazed over with sadness.

"What do you mean?" Riverstorm sat beside him, letting her best friend lean against her.

"Only myself, the medicine cats and Ivystar knew. Did you ever notice how Ivystar spent most of her days in camp? And how skinny she is?" Riverstorm looked over the leader, she hadn't paid much attention as Ivystar had always been lean, but her ribs were visible through her pelt. "She had an incurable sickness that Eagleclaw couldn't cure. It claimed six of her nine lives."

"Six?" Riverstorm stared in disbelief.

Lionpelt nodded. "She said she thought about stepping down as leader, but she didn't want to let Goldenstar down." Riverstorm was shocked that Ivystar had managed to hide such a devastating illness from the entire Clan, she had never even had an idea. Lionpelt let out a sigh. "I knew my leadership would be coming soon, but I didn't think it would be today."

"You will do a great job, Lionpelt." Riverstorm touched her muzzle to his shoulder. "I know you will."

"Thank you." Lionpelt slowly raised his head, glancing towards the sky. "Maybe when I get my nine lives I will finally see everyone I've lost." He closed his eyes slowly, Riverstorm let him enjoy his moment of silence.

He will make a good leader, and that's what AshClan. A strong and healthy leader who will take us into a bright future. Riverstorm wished that she could be his deputy, but she hadn't trained an apprentice yet. *I will still be by his side and support him.* She looked up the sky

with him. *I will never stop serving this Clan.*

Chapter 40

"Everything looks clear." Echoheart reported from the SunClan border, unable to scent anything out of the ordinary. She padded back to her patrol after marking the border. "No unusual activity from SunClan." She told Cloverstrike.

"Great." Cloverstrike nodded. "Let's go ahead and head back to the camp. I know that Ivystar was planning something with Lionpelt and Riverstorm. They may be back already." The cats of the patrol nodded and Echoheart followed her Clanmates back to camp.

Throughout the several moons that had gone by, Echoheart's life had slowed down. She lived a peaceful life, she no longer felt trapped by those who abused her and treated her like crowfood. She had learned that Cedarclaw died to a badger at a gathering a few moons ago and though part of her wished that she could done it herself, she was glad that he was gone from the forest.

Echoheart had finally had a moment to tear Riverstorm down, when Batpaw died she saw her chance and struck her sister while she was already down. She had gotten great pleasure watching her sister suffer and finally realize the monster she had turned herself into. Riverstorm had been so stupid to let her apprentic recklessly play in the river, it was her fault that Batpaw, Berrypaw and Feathernose had died. Part of Echoheart wished that Riverstorm had died in the river as well.

However, their father had finally died. Echoheart had never felt so free when she learned that Jayclaw had died, she wished she could think Ratpelt for starting that fight. She had pretend to assure him that it was not his fault and the two of them had become quite close friends, she had with her former apprentice as well. Crowstep was a good warrior, she was proud of the cat he had become.

Echoheart's mind had slowly become a twisted place, at first she was scared and tried so hard to fight it but eventually she realized it was futile. She let the thoughts consume her mind, she found it

cathartic. She would never act on her thoughts, but they helped her to release the anger and pain that had consumed her for so long. Cedarclaw and Jayclaw were dead and she had broken the last tendril that formed hers and Riverstorm's relationship. She still considered Moonwhisker her sister, but as far as she was concerned Riverstorm was a stranger, not even worthy to be called a Clanmate.

Echoheart pushed her thoughts away and followed her patrol until they reached the AshClan camp. She could see that neither Ivystar nor Lionpelt were back yet so she broke away from the patrol and decided to help herself to some fresh-kill. She sat down near the warrior's den and started eating the squirrel she picked.

AshClan had been doing well, but Echoheart found herself not really caring about how well her Clan was doing. She didn't feel any pride in being an AshClan she-cat. She had made more friends during this time, but she still had cats who wanted nothing to do with her like Spiderheart, but Echoheart didn't care.

Echoheart would continue to live her life as an AshClan warrior, but she really didn't think she had any loyalty or drive to do things for her Clan anymore. When she was an apprentice she had the same loyalty and pride in her Clan but now she felt no attachment to the fact that she was an AshClan warrior. She could be a warrior in any Clan, it didn't matter to her. Perhaps it was her relationship with Cedarclaw that started these feelings, or maybe it was the fact that Echoheart felt no emotional attachment to a single cat in this Clan.

She didn't feel any grief when her Clanmates died or any enjoyment when they were made warriors. She felt nothing towards the cats in this Clan and that was okay to her. She briefly wondered what a life as a loner or rogue would be, but she had never fully made the decision to leave her Clan even if it had crossed her mind.

Echoheart wasn't an AshClan warrior, she was a warrior living in AshClan and for now she was okay with that. She had reached the conclusion that she would never feel powerful emotions again, not since Cedarclaw. After that her emotions slowly began to fall apart and die like the trees in leaf-bare. She was okay with this, maybe one day another cat would ignite those emotions again but for now

they lay dormant inside of her heart.

Echoheart finished up and her squirrel and discarded the remains before sunning herself and washing her pelt. She noticed that some cats were starting to get worried that Ivystar, Lionpelt and Riverstorm hadn't returned yet. Echoheart knew that a rogue had been scented several times in the territory, but surely three fully trained warriors could take on some scrawny warriors.

More time passed and it was nearly sunset when Echoheart caught the scent of the three cats as well as the scent of blood. Riverstorm and Lionpelt stepped into view from the back of the camp, their eyes shadowed with grief as they carried the limp body of Ivystar on their backs. *Interesting.* Echoheart blinked, feeling slightly surprised as their Clanmates ran up to the three of them. *I should probably act distressed.* Echoheart rose to her paws and faked the emotion of worry and grief on her face, something she had gotten used to doing.

Echoheart followed her Clanmates as they gathered around Ivystar's body. "What happened to her?" Grasstail demanded.

"We split up to try and scent out the rogue." Riverstorm explained, Lionpelt was clearly too distraught. Echoheart noticed she had some claw marks down the side of her face covered with dried blood. "He found Ivystar first and they fought, but she unfortunately lost."

"Was that really her last life?" Sharptongue mewed skeptically. "She hasn't been leader for that long."

Lionpelt lifted his head and glanced over at Eagleclaw who had been watching sadly from the side. He gave the golden tabby and nod and Lionpelt let out a sigh. "I'm sure you all remember a few moons after Ivystar became leader she got sick for about a moon?" Echoheart briefly recalled that time. "Well that sickness never left her body, it continued to weaken her and slowly kill her. Eagleclaw and Moonwhisker worked hard to try and keep her strong and healthy, but she would have every bad days as this violent illness killed her over and over. Most of her nine lives were lost because of this illness. StarClan told Eagleclaw that there was no cure. "

"Why would she keep something like that a secret from her Clan?" Hazalfern lowered her head sadly.

"A Clan leader never wants to show weakness." Riverstorm spoke up, something about her tone of voice pricked anger into Echoheart's pelt. "Not even to their own Clanmates." She let out a sigh. "The loss of Ivystar is tragic, but I know that AshClan will be in safe paws with Lionpelt as our leader, he is the son of Goldenstar and an incredible loyal and strong warrior." *She wants to be deputy so badly.* Echoheart thought with amusement. *Too bad your apprentice died.*

"Thank you, Riverstorm." Lionpelt dipped his head. "I was not expecting to become leader so soon, but I promise that I will be the best possible leader I can for this Clan. It was honor to serve Ivystar and will be an honor to lead this Clan in her legacy."

"Lionpelt! Lionpelt! Lionpelt!" The Clan cheered for their new leader and Echoheart had to admit that she thought Lionpelt would make a good leader as well. Luckily he had none of the traits of Goldenstar and all the traits of Scorchlight. He would lead AshClan into an era of peace and Echoheart wouldn't have to deal with her sister as leader. She looked at Riverstorm. *If everything goes well, she'll die before Lionpelt ever does and she will never lead this Clan. How fitting that would be.*

The Clan held a vigil for a fallen leader throughout the night before the elders took her body to be buried, afterwards Lionpelt and Eagleclaw set out so he could receive his nine lives. Echoheart settled into her nest and she knew by the time she woke up, Lionpelt would be the new leader of AshClan

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Echoheart's sleep was dreamless as it usually was, she woke just past dawn and climbed out of her den letting out a yawn. She stretched out and was awake just in time for Lionpelt and Eagleclaw to return to camp, something about the golden tom seemed different. "Welcome back." Echoheart mewed to him with a dip of her head. "I'm assuming all went well?"

"It did, thank you." He dipped his head. "In the eyes of StarClan, I am now Lionstar."

"Don't forget about your deputy." Eagleclaw mewed facing Lionstar. "I'm going to go get some rest."

"Thank you for everything, Eagleclaw." Lionstar bowed his head and the medicine cat returned to his den. After he was gone, the new leader turned to Echoheart. "I'm glad that you're the first cat I saw, I actually wanted to speak with you a moment if you don't mind."

"Of course, Lionstar." Echoheart wondered what he could possibly want from her. She respected him, but he was Riverstorm's best friend. They were never close. Regardless she followed him into his new den and sat down once they were inside.

"During the entire trip to the Moonstone I was thinking long and hard about who I wanted to become my deputy. I wanted your sister to be my deputy if I ever became leader, but unfortunately that is not possible because of Batpaw's accident." Echoheart didn't understand why he was telling her this. "However another cat came to mind. You. I want you to be my deputy, Echoheart."

Echoheart's eyes widend and she found herself genuinely surprised. "You want me to become your deputy?" *Does he see me as the second best for Riverstorm? I'm* not *her.* "I'm nothing like Riverstorm I--"

"I know this." Lionstar raised his tail. "I do worry that if Riverstorm ever became leader she would be like my mother and that's not what this Clan needs right now. What AshClan needs is a time of peace, you were never afraid to speak out against my mother and you always looked out for others. I think you will be the best cat to be deputy for this Clan right now."

Echoheart thought for a moment, she had never once considered becoming deputy or leader. She had grown up just wanting to be the best warrior she could be, and yet something about this seemed so...perfect.

Riverstorm wanted nothing more than to be leader, and she tore Echoheart down for so long thinking that she was *better.* Echoheart

felt a sense of satisfaction flowing through her body. *And for me, her pathetic little sister to take the deputyship from her. How perfect.* "I'll do it, Lionstar." She spoke up. "I would be honored to serve you and this Clan." She didn't really care about that part, but she had been given a chance to show Riverstorm once and for all that she had *failed.*

"Thank you, Echoheart." Lionstar breathed a sigh of relief. "I'll be holding the ceremony once more of the Clan wakes up." Echoheart nodded and stepped out of Lionstar's den. She quickly spotted Riverstorm talking with Graypelt near the fresh-kill pile as they had woken up. *I want to tell her now, but I would rather see the look on her face as Lionstar tells the whole Clan that I am deputy instead of her.*

It didn't take long for the rest of AshClan to wake, though the cloud of grief that followed Ivystar's death was thick in the air, the new leader would sure be able to break that. Once the Clan was awake, Lionstar made his way to the center of camp. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!"

Echoheart sat with the rest of the crowd as they gathered around their new leader for the very first time. "My ceremony was a success and I have earned my nine lives from StarClan. I am a little nervous about leading this Clan, but as I said last night I am proud that I get to serve such a strong and loyal Clan."

"Lionstar! Lionstar!" The Clan briefly cheered their new leader.

"I do need to take care of something very important first, I will need to name my new deputy." Echoheart sat patiently and quietly, not revealing anything. "The cat that I have chosen may not be one you expect, but I know that she is a very hardworking and loyal AshClan warrior, she has shown kindness and rationality in the past and I trust with every hair on my pelt that she is the best choice." Echoheart wasn't sure that anyone had ever spoken so kindly about her, she wished she could feel good about it. "I say these words before the spirits of StarClan so that they may hear and approve my choice. Echoheart will be the new deputy of AshClan."

Echoheart could instantly tell that no one in AshClan had been expecting this news, but she rose to her paws to face her Clan. Her

eyes instantly went to Riverstorm's. Her sister's blue eyes were wide and filled with surprise and perhaps a little bit of betrayal. "I wasn't certain about being deputy at first," Echoheart started speaking. "But I've always wanted to be the best AshClan warrior I can be and if serving our brand new leader as we step into a new era is what I need to do do achieve that than I am more than willing to help him bring this Clan into a new age of strength and glory." All of the words that left her mouths were lies, but no one needed to do that.

"Echoheart! Echoheart! Echoheart!" The cats of AshClan cheered for their new deputy, she could feel that her words had truly resonated with them and she felt a growing sense of power inside of her chest. *This is just too perfect.*

After a few moments of celebrating, the meeting broke apart and Echoheart was congratulated by several cats including Lilyclaw, Graypelt, Crowstep and Cloverstrike. *They all respect me now.* She thought with a satisfied purr. *How wonderful.* The last cat to approach her was Riverstorm. *This will be rich.* She thought snidely.

"Congratulations." Riverstorm dipped her head, the word was clearly forced. "I know you'll do great."

"You know, Riverstorm." Echoheart mewed, feeling a sadistic sense wash over her. *This is my chance to break her even further.* "I never really wanted this, I was completely satisfied with my life as a normal AshClan warrior." Riverstorm looked up at her curiously. "But when Lionstar asked me I couldn't turn it down. You see, I never wanted this but *you* did." She leaned in closer, meeting Riverstorm's eyes they filled with pain. "*You* wanted nothing more than to be leader and here I am, your useless, weak sister *taking* that from you. Now everyone in the Clan respects *me* and not you." She let out a low chuckle. "Hurts, doesn't it?"

Without another word, she left the stunned Riverstorm behind and started padding towards her Clanmates to start planning patrols for the first time. She felt not regret for the words she said, no remorse for anything she had done. *I never expect my life to play out this way.* Jayclaw, Cedarclaw, Riverstorm, the cats who had all hurt her so deeply. *Look at me now. I'm better than you ever thought I would be, and it was all thanks to myself, none of you.* She had to hold herself

back from laughing at the irony. *I win.*

Chapter 41

Moonwhisker finished her task of cleaning up the herb store, making sure that everything was nice and neat before she and Eagleclaw left for the Moonstone for the half-moon. About a quarter-moon prior to this they had an encounter with a badger that had claimed the lives of both Hollytail and Hazelfern and many more had been injured. Moonwhisker and her mentor had been hard at work treating the wounds of those injured but it left their medicine cat den in quite a state of disarray.

Before they left Moonwhisker turned to her mentor. "I'm going to go check on Nightstorm and Ashkit before we leave."

"Alright." Eagleclaw waved his tail without turning around and Moonwhisker padded over to the nursery after grabbing some borage. After several moons of the nursery being empty Nightstorm had given birth to a single kit who she named Ashkit. He was a dark tabby tom and had the fighting spirit of a fox. Nightstorm had continued to keep the father a secret, but no one on the Clan really bothered her about it.

It was very welcome to have cats in the nursery again, even if it was just a single kit. Moonwhisker had suespected that Nightstorm had carried more kits but they didn't make it as far as Ashkit, especially considering the unfortunate fate of her first two kits, the little ones that Ashkit would never meet.

Moonwhisker poked her head into the nursery and saw Nightstorm washing her paws while Ashkit slept at her side. He had been born just a few days prior and still spent most of his time sleeping. "Good evening, Nightstorm." She mewed kindly.

The queen stopped cleaning her paws and glanced towards the medicine cat. "Hello, Moonwhisker. Here to give me more borage?"

Moonwhisker nodded and set the herb down which Nightstorm ate without hesitation. "Thank you." She mewed. "I am having some

issues with my milk, luckily it's just Ashkit even if he eats enough for two whole kits."

Moonwhisker purred. "How is doing? Has he shown any signs of weakness."

Nightstorm shook her head. "Not at all, the opposite in fact. He's already trying to play, even if he does end up sleeping half the day. He's definitely a fighter." She gently touched her muzzle to his forehead.

"I'm glad to hear that." Moonwhisker purred, glancing down at the little bundle of fur who slept peacefully, twitching every once in a while. *Oh the dreams of kits.* She thought blissfully. "Eagleclaw and I will be leaving for the Moonstone soon, if you need anything we left some extra borage out in the medicine cat den that you can grab if you need."

"Thank you so much, Moonwhisker." Nightstorm dipped her head. "You and Eagleclaw have a safe trip now, may StarClan light your paths."

"Thank you." Moonwhisker purred happily and left the nursery, returning to medicine cat den. "Everything is great with both of them, both Nightstorm and Ashkit are happy, strong and healthy."

"That's good to hear." Eagleclaw mewed, turning to face Moonwhisker. "I was worried that we would lose Ashkit as well. It's about time we got some new apprentices. I'm hoping Petalshine will go and move into the nursery already, she's been pining after Featherfall their whole lives."

Moonwhisker let out a small laugh. "You're not usually one to pay attention to Clan relations, Eagleclaw."

"Look we've been without apprentices for a long time now, we need some." He snorted and padded past her. "Come on, Moonwhisker. We've got to get to the Moonstone and we're wasting time."

Moonwhisker purred in amusement but followed her mentor. Eagleclaw could hide his soft side from the rest of the Clan, but she

had spent nearly her entire life with him and she knew the truth. *He can act stoic all he wants, but I know he really cares for every single cat in this Clan.*

Moonwhisker passed Echoheart assigning patrols on their way out and gave her sister a brief nod which she did not return leaving Moonwhisker feeling slightly uneasy. It had been a little over two moons since Lionstar became leader and named Echoheart his deputy and she had sensed a lot of changes in both of her sisters.

Riverstorm had already gone through a lot, after the death of Batpaw she never truly recovered and something about Echoheart becoming deputy made it even worse. She couldn't remember the last time she had seen the two of them even speak to each other than than when Echoheart was assigning patrols.

She once again thought back to the omen she received such a long time ago, that one of her sisters would venture down a dark and bloody path. For so long she had thought that it would be Riverstorm. Riverstorm had been reckless and arrogant for so long, surely she would've been the one but then both of them changed.

Moonwhisker had seen Echoheart shift into the former caring and compassionate she-cat to one with blank and cold stares, she showed no compassion for her Clanmates and wasn't even sad when their father died. Echoheart had changed, and that changed scared Moonwhisker.

She just couldn't find it in her heart to think that Echoheart would ever hurt another cat, not in a violent way. She had spoken out against pointless battles in the past. What would Echoheart be like as a leader? Would she be peaceful? Or would she change even further and would she lead AshClan down the dark and violent path that Moonwhisker had been warned about. *Did I mess up? Should I have been worried about Echoheart this entire time?*

Moonwhisker sincerely hoped that she would be able to speak to Featherstorm tonight and get some answers, she needed to know if the omen had already come true or if she still had time to fix it.

The walk to the Moonstone was a long one but they finally started

meeting up with the other medicine cats. The first one they saw was Barkclaw of LichenClan and they eventually met up with Poppyfur of SunClan and Ravenheart of MoonClan. "Good evening everyone." Barkclaw mewed once they met up.

Moonwhisker looked to Poppyfur, the SunClan she-cat always seemed to have a haunted look in her eyes, especially since her mentor Honeywing was killed in battle when the LichenClan leader Elmstar led an assault on their Clan. The Clan was now led by Jaggedstar and much more peaceful.

"How's the prey running." Ravenheart greeted kindly.

"It's well." Barkclaw responded. "And you?"

"Also well, thank you."

"May we please continued." Eagleclaw growled. "We're not here to exchange pleasantries."

"As grumpy as ever I see, Eagleclaw." Ravenheart chuckled, but the medicine cats continued forward. They crossed the river and ventured into the chilling Spirit Woods. Moonwhisker also wasn't much more conversations tonight, she needed to get answers about her sisters.

At long last they reached the Spirit Tree and descended into the dark cavern below where the Moonstone was housed. Moonwhisker waited no time laying down before the stone and touching her nose to the cold surface.

She instantly slipped into a quiet slumber before opening her eyes and finding herself in the Spirit Woods, the trees glowing brighter than ever. "Featherstorm?" She called out, frantically hoping to see the old medicine cat.

"I'm here, Moonwhisker." The gentle voice of the medicine cat spoke and soon enough the silver she-cat appeared in front of her. "You're worried about your sisters."

"I am." Moonwhisker admitted, letting out a sigh. "I was so certain that the cat that was going down the bloody path was Riverstorm.

Did I stop her? Did she change or was I wrong, is Echoheart the one destined for violence?"

"I was certain that it was Riverstorm as well, but when I look at them I still see the same vision. One down a path of light, one down a path of bloodshed. I believe that Echoheart is the one we need to worry about."

'But what I can do stop that?" Moonwhisker pleaded. "Can I still stop her?"

"I do not know, Moonwhisker." Featherstorm sighed. "This is as just as frustrating for me. I wish I could simply look into the future and tell you the right answer, but I can't. The best advice I can give is for you to open your heart to your sister, try and repair the relationship between her and Riverstorm, she needs the two of you."

"What if she doesn't accept that?"

"You have to try, Moonwhisker. You have to keep trying and if you are unable...then Echoheart will need to be stopped before she can harm her Clan or anyone in it. Trust me, Moonwhisker." Feathernose touched her muzzle to Moonwhisker's forehead. "I believe in you, you can save your sister still."

*****

Moonwhisker rose from her nest the nest morning after returning from the Moonstone. She had barely slept as she tried to figure out a way to reform the relationship between Riverstorm and Echoheart that had long been tattered and broken. *I have to try.* Moonwhisker told herself and after checking on Nightstorm and Ashkit again, decided to try and find Echoheart. She had a feeling that it would be more difficult convincing her than Riverstorm.

She spotted her sister organizing patrols as she usually did and approached her whens he was finished. "Good morning, Echoheart." She dipped her head. Echoheart turned her to her, her murky green eyes once again filled with the same emptiness that Moonwhisker had grown used to.

"Did you need something Moonwhisker?"

"Just to talk, if you have time." Moonwhisker did her best to sound cheerful. "You've been so busy lately, I miss my sister."

"Alright." Echoheart gave a small nod, her expression unchanging. "I have a bit of time before I go on patrol. What did you need?"

"Let's go on a walk." Moonwhisker suggested. "We'll be back in time, I promise." Echoheart didn't object and Moonwhisker led her out in the forest.

"What did you want to talk about?" Echoheart questioned once they were outside of camp.

"I just wanna see how you're doing. You're doing a great job as deputy, I wanted to let you know."

"Thanks." Echoheart replied, but there was no sincerity in her mew. "You seem uncomfortable, Moonwhisker. Is everything okay?"

Moonwhisker stopped and let out a quiet sigh. *I won't get anywhere with small talk.* "I'm just a bit worried about you, Echoheart."

"Why are you worried about me?" Echoheart's eyes narrowed slightly.

"You've just...changed. You're not the same cat you used to be. You're just so...distant."

For a moment, Echoheart's eyes darkened. "Is that such a bad thing? Is it so bad that I'm no longer the cat that everyone used to take advantage of?" Her tone of voice shifted, she was getting upset.

"That's not what--"

"Of course it's what you meant, Moonwhisker." Echoheart's expression had finally changed, but it was one of anger. "I'm not the perfect little obedient she-cat just trying her best. The cat that Riverstorm and our father treated like waste of space, the one that every cat in this Clan saw as *weak*." She hissed. "I'm *not* that cat and I never will be again."

"Echoheart I didn't mean anything by it."

"Don't act so sweet and innocent, Moonwhisker.' Echoheart spat, causing Moonwhisker to wince. "You act so high and mighty as a medicine cat sometimes it sickens me. You try so hard to fix me when you never even stopped to consider that I *don't want to be fixed.*" Her voice lowered into a growl. "This is the cat that everyone else has turned me into and it is the cat that everyone else is stuck with."

Moonwhisker took a step back. "It doesn't have to be this way, you, me and Riverstorm could---"

"I don't want to hear *anything* about Riverstorm!" Echoheart suddenly shouted, she looked at Moonwhisker with pure rage in her eyes, Moonwhisker flattened herself to the ground, feeling a brief sensation of fear. *Echoheart would never hurt me.* She reminded herself. "*Riverstorm* treated me like fox-dung my entire life! I don't owe *her* or anyone else, *anything!*" Echoheart glared down at her sister. "And that includes you. I don't need sisters." She turned away, flicking her tail. "Goodbye, Moonwhisker." She padded back towards camp, leaving Moonwhisker alone and trembling.

I failed. Moonwhisker thought. *I'm too late, I don't know if I can stop her anymore.* Moonwhisker stared after her sister, an overwhelming sensation of dread filling her heart. *She's too far gone. Oh Echoheart, I'm so sorry.*

Chapter 42

"SunClan proudly welcomes two new apprentices. Even though they are not in attendance tonight we honor Dawnpaw and Turtlepaw!" The cats of the Clans cheered for their newest apprentices. That is all SunClan has to report tonight." The SunClan leader, Flowerstar, dipped her head and sat down.

"I'll finish this up," Lionstar spoke, rising to his paws. "AshClan also welcomes two new apprentices. Silverpaw and Stormpaw!" The Clans cheered once again. "Foxfeather also recently gave birth to Hawkkit and Harekit, they are happy and healthy in their Clan." Lionstar looked over the crowd. "Other than that, AshClan remains strong and we are thriving."

"I see no reason to end this gathering yet," Jaggedstar mewed. "It's a beautiful night, let's enjoy the clear weather."

"I agree." Crowstar of MoonClan nodded. The cats of the other Clans started conversing, but Echoheart didn't really have any interest in talking with any other cats. She would probably do what she always did and idly listen to the other deputies talk.

Many moons and seasons had passed she became a deputy and also had her talk with Moonwhisker where she snapped. She hadn't intended to snap at her sister like that, but she had been so enraged. She had long put that conversation behind her, but she had also broken their relationship. She had her friendships in her Clan and cats that followed her closely such as Graypelt, Lilyclaw and Cloverstrike. She didn't need anyone else.

A lot had happened for AshClan in the several moons that had passed, they had lost some cats but also gained some. Ashpaw was now an apprentice and Riverstorm was his mentor, he was close to earning his warrior name. Petalshine had also given birth to Silverpaw and Stormpaw and Cloverstrike had given birth to Ratpelt's kits, Larkpaw and Wheatpaw. The Clan was thriving, they had a full apprentice den and as Lionstar had said, Foxwhisker was

now in the nursery with Mudthorn's kits.

Echoheart listened to Tigertail and Mossleaf talk about hunting and prey, not really paying them any mind when she heard someone approach her. She got bored and decided to at least wander so she could stretch her legs before her Clan returned home. She padded through the crowd going nowhere in particular until she nearly bumped into a pale tabby tom. It was Thornpelt of SunClan. "Sorry." She apologized briefly,

"No worries." His amber eyes regarded her curiously. "Echoheart, right? AshClan deputy."

She nodded. "That's me." Thornpelt opened his mouth to speak but was cut off by loud laughing. Both of them turned their heads and saw Riverstorm talking with some LichenClan warriors. She was laughing and bragging about some prey she caught. Echoheart rolled her eyes and let out a groan.

"Something wrong?" Thornpelt questioned.

"Just my sister." Echoheart glared at Riverstorm. "Bragging as usual."

"I sense the two of you don't get along." Thornpelt mewed, also looking at Riverstorm.

"You could say that." Echoheart flicked her tail. "She treated me like crowfood our entire lives, she always thought she was better than everyone else. Thought she would lead the Clan someday, but I became deputy and not her." Echoheart snorted. "In my eyes she deserves nothing but pain." Echoheart quickly realized she had let some of her darker thoughts slip, something that never happened. "Sorry," She mewed quickly. "It's just annoying to think about."

"Oh I completely understand." Thornpelt's eyes darkened. "My own brother became deputy when it should've gone to me. All because Flowerstar is a coward, I haven't even gotten an apprentice yet."

"You've been a warrior for quite some time." Echoheart noted, she wasn't that much older than him. He was about the age of Lilyclaw

and Graypelt. "That's surprising."

"It's all because of Flowerstar." He grumbled and Echoheart could see something dark in his eyes and something...familiar. *He's just like me.* Echoheart realized and stared at his time, suddenly feeling a rush of something strange, something that she hadn't felt in a long time.

"AshClan!" Lionstar's voice rang out over the crowd of cats. "It's time to go home!"

"I-I have to go." Echoheart mewed, unable to take her eyes of Thornpelt at first. His intense amber gaze met her own.

"It was very nice speaking with you Echoheart, I hope we get to speak again soon." His words felt like honey flowing through her ears and she nearly shuddered. *What is this. I haven't felt anything like this since...* She shook her head. *No. Not possible.*

"You as well." Echoheart quickly turned away and joined Lionstar's side as the rest of AshClan gathered and left the gathering hollow. *This is impossible.* She told herself over and over, but Thornpelt's fierce amber gaze burned in her mind the entire rest of her night. *Impossible.*

*****

Nearly a quarter moon had passed since Echoheart's encounter with Thornpelt at the gathering and she hadn't stopped thinking about him. She hadn't seen or spoken to him since then but part of her wanted to. She had told herself that it was because she could tell he had been abused just as she had been, she wanted to know everything about him. *Maybe he could help me understand myself more.*

She wondered if Thornpelt also had the same dark thoughts as her, did he struggle with this as well? Or was she alone? If Thornpelt truly did understand then Echoheart wouldn't feel as alone, she would finally have a cat in this world who *understood* her. She was worried that she was having the same feelings she had towards Cedarclaw, but she did her best to keep those thoughts silent.

Echoheart was certain that she would never feel those feelings again.

Echoheart once again found herself trying to force away those thoughts and continue with hunting. She was near the SunClan border and part of her truly hoped that she would be able to see him, but she knew it wasn't likely so she just continued hunting.

She tracked a squirrel to the border where it was completely unaware of her prescanse, she lowered herself to the ground and pounced. She killed it swiftly and cleanly, as she buried her kill she heard a voice spoke from the other side of the border. "Good catch."

She jumped slightly as she looked up and met Thornpelt's gaze. She stiffened, but managed to keep her composure. *I really did end up seeing him.* "Thank you." She dipped her head respectfully. "Are you also out hunting?"

"Sort of." Thornpelt set down, focusing his intense gaze onto her once more. "But to tell the truth I've been hoping to see you again. I keep coming by the border in hopes of seeing you but haven't been able to. Today was my lucky day I suppose." Her pelt burned as she faced him.

"What do you mean? Why would you want to see *me?"*

"Because, Echoheart, that night we spoke at the gathering I sense something inside of you. Something that was all too familiar to me. You've been treated poorly by those around you and they move on with their lives while you're left to suffer with the consequences. You've been having...dark thoughts. Thoughts about hurting those cats even though you're supposed to love them, am I right?"

Echoheart stared in complete shock at Thornpelt. *He does understand. I knew he did.* Echoheart let out a sigh, feeling the barrier she had built up for so long. "Yes." She admitted. "I've hid it for so long, but I wanted to hurt my sister for so long. I was glad when my father died, I *wanted* revenge for the things they did to me, but I never could. I can't just attack my sister, but every time she speaks I have such a strong urge to shred her pelt. It's bad, but I've gotten good at hiding it."

"You shouldn't have to hide it, Echoheart. Riverstorm treated you so poorly, she deserves retribution for her actions." Echoheart looked back up at him, noticing he had stepped closer. Echoheart's heart started pounding her chest. "Perhaps...you and I can...work together." His eyes glinted.

"What do you mean?"

"You and I both have goals in mind, you want to make your sister suffer for the abuse she made you endure and I want to punish my brother for taking what belonged to me and to punish Flowerstar for holding me back for so long. You and I can work together."

Something about the words that flowed from Thornpelt made Echoheart feel...energized. *Would he really be willing to help me?* "What exactly are you talking about."

"I've been coming up with a plan to get myself an apprentice, and I know exactly which one I want but I need help. I need *your* help, but it won't be easy."

"What do you need?" Echoheart was overwhelmed with a desire to help this cat, she felt as if she had been caught in a trap, but she didn't care.

"It involves you killing one of my Clanmates."

Echoheart's eyes widened. "You want me to *kill* one of your Clanmates? Why?"

"Because she's the mentor of Dawnpaw, I want Dawnpaw to become *my* apprentice and with her out of the way, I will make sure that I get the apprentice I deserve."

Echoheart thought for a moment, Thornpelt was asking Echoheart to *kill* another cat. An innocent cat and one of his Clanmates. In a normal circumstance that would be very wrong, but if Thornpelt was truly the same as Echoheart her probably didn't care about his Clanmates either. *He was wronged, just like I was.*

"Which cat is it?"

"Do you know Sunstream?"

"The golden she-cat right." Echoheart checked and Thornpelt nodded. "So if I do kill Sunstream, how exactly does this help me?"

"Killing Sunstream is a small piece in my greater plan to become SunClan's leader and bring it back to a state of glory. If you help me get there I can promise you a bright future. If you chose I would welcome you into SunClan to become my deputy, and I would bring Riverstorm to you. So you can kill her yourself."

The thought of killing Riverstorm...the thought of ruling by Thornpelt's side...her made her entire body tingle with excitement and *hunger.* "I'll do it." Echoheart spoke without thinking. "I will do this for you."

Thornpelt's expression shifted into one of pure twisted joy. "Thank you so much, Echoheart. It may take some time to plan, but I will keep meeting with you so we can form the perfect plan to take what's rightfully ours." He crossed the border and got even closer to Echoheart, causing her heart to pound even harder. "Trust me, Echoheart. You *won't* regret this."

Echoheart stared at him, she was helping a clearly twisted cat but she was also twisted. *I'll do this. He's the first cat to ever see me for who I am and to understand.* Echoheart's felt a draw towards him, in such a short time she had felt herself falling for him. *He's not Cedarclaw.* She told herself. *He's so much better.* She looked deep into his amber eyes. *I will do anything to help him on his mission.*

Epilogue

Riverstorm returned to her camp, her entire body exhausted from the wounds that laced her body. She looked around what little Clanmates she had left, their bodies also broken and wounded but their eyes were filled with a little bit of light behind the exhaustion. Riverstorm lifted her head, looking around her camp. It had been so long since she had been here, not since she, Silvermoon, Haresong and Lilyclaw all fled the camp to escape from Thornstar's tyrannical hold over their Clan.

AshClan camp was almost unrecognizable, bones of prey and crowfood were strewn about the camp and it reeked of rotting prey. Dens were in disrepair and it looked so...dead. "First things first." Riverstorm raised her voice. "We need to get our camp cleaned up, we to return it to its former glory."

"I think need to discuss a few other things first." Ashblaze spoke up. "We have no official leader and no medicine cat."

Riverstorm sighed. "We will discuss leadership--"

"I think it's obvious who the next leader should be." Silvermoon mewed, getting the attention of her Clanmates. "It should be you, Riverstorm. You were deputy before Thornstar took over and honestly, you are the most deserving of you. You kept us rallied, you gave us hope and you helped lead AshClan into victory."

"I agree." Ashblaze stood next to his mate. "But as a Clan, we should decide." He turned to his Clanmates. "All those in favor of having Riverstorm as AshClan's new leader, say I!"

"I!" Every single cat in AshClan raised their voices, taking Riverstorm by surprise. *They really want me to be their leader.* She was overcome by emotion, she had honestly given up on her dream of becoming leader of this Clan.

She had only focused on being there for her Clan, especially when

Thornstar took over she had to focus solely on protecting her Clanmates, but here she was now, in the place where she had wanted to be almost her entire life. *If this is what my Clanmates want, then I will be happy to honor their wishes.*

"I thank you all so much for entrusting me to be your leader, I promise I will work my absolute hardest to bring our Clan back to the way it used to be, strong and powerful but I cannot do it alone. Our Clan was once full of many warriors, and we are now very small. Please lend me your strength as we work together to reforge the Clan we love so much." Riverstorm could see the light and energy returning to her Clanmates eyes. "I will go to the Moonstone tonight, for now, let's get started."

The cats of AshClan worked hard to start rebuilding and cleaning up their camp and Riverstorm was left with her thoughts and she wandered out to get building material. She wondered just how well her Clan would be able to recover from this, let alone Riverstorm. She felt an unbearable guilty weighing on her shoulders.

She couldn't get the image of Echoheart fleeing out of her mind. The sister she should've loved, the sister she should've built up instead of tearing down. *I'm so sorry Echoheart.* She thought. *I hope you know I love you, I really do.* Perhaps if Riverstorm had been kinder to Echoheart, his never would've happened. *I was a terrible sister and Clanmate, but with the help of my Clanmates I can rise above and be better. Not only for my Clan, but for myself.*

Riverstorm returned to camp with moss and bracken and helped rebuild the damaged dens. Her paws were sore and she was exhausted, but it had to be done. When she finished with the warrior's den she glanced sadly over at the medicine cat den. She stepped inside and was instantly overcome with grief.

She sat down in the den, feeling emotion wash over her. *Oh Moonwhisker.* The medicine cat den had clearly been empty for so long, she remembered all too well when she left Moonwhisker alone in the forest after telling her plan and she was killed by Echoheart. *It's my fault.* Riverstorm had done so many wrong things in her life, she felt as if she had caused the deaths of so many. *I hope to see you in StarClan, sister.*

She looked around the den, wondering about their other issue of their lack of a medicine cat. *A Clan can't be a Clan without a medicine cat and Moonwhisker never took an apprentice.*

"Excuse me, Riversotrm?" She lifted her head and turned around, spotting Skypaw standing in the medicine cat den entrance.

"Yes, Skypaw" Riverstorm faced the young warrior. "Did you need something?"

"I want to talk to you about something." He sighed and sat down, Riverstorm did the same. Skypaw and his siblings had been forced to become apprentices at a young age, before they were six moons and the three of them had been forced to grow up so soon, but they had all grown into incredible cats. Riverstorm wondered if she should make them warriors.

"I know that I'm not even a warrior yet," He spoke. "But I know that our warrior ceremonies probably aren't far off."

"Funny you say that, I was just thinking about making you and your siblings warriors after getting my nine lives."

He nodded slowly. "The truth is, while I want to become a warrior more than anything, I think there's something else that I need to do."

Riverstorm looked at him with deep concern. "What do you mean? Is something wrong?"

"We need a medicine cat, and no one else is willing to step forward. If StarClan will accept me, I am willing to become our new medicine cat."

Riverstorm's eyes went wide. "Are you sure, Skypaw? Are you absolutely certain this is what you want?"

"It's not about what I want, Riverstorm. It's about what AshClan needs. I will learn herbs with the help of StarClan and when its time for me to train an apprentice maybe I will return to being a warrior."

Riverstorm could barely believe what she was hearing. *He is giving up his dream for the benefit of the Clan. Just as I did.* "Skypaw you are being so incredibly mature and making a big sacrifice. AshClan will be very lucky to have you as a medicine cat and I will be honored to work along side you, leading this Clan."

"Thank you, Riverstorm." Skypaw dipped his head.

"We should inform the Clan, I will also be taking you with me to the Spirit Tree tonight, so StarClan can welcome you as a medicine cat." Skypaw agreed and he and Riverstorm stepped out into the camp. They would have to leave soon, but she needed to tell the Clan. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!"

The Clan stopped working and turned to Riverstorm, it didn't take long for the remaining warriors to gather. "As you know, we are without a medicine cat but this brave apprentice has stepped forward and is willing to fill that role. Skypaw has decided that he will be trained by StarClan to be our new medicine cat."
There were several gasps of shock and his two siblings padded forward along with their parents Lilyclaw and Wheatwhisker. "Are you sure about this, Skypaw?" Wheatwhisker looked at his son.

"I am." Skypaw nodded. "AshClan needs a medicine cat, and I am willing to fill that role."

"I am so proud of you." Lilyclaw padded forward and nuzzled her son. "You will make a wonderful medicine cat."

"With that being said, Skypaw will be joining me on my journey to the Moonstone so he can be accepted by StarClan." The two of them bid their farewells and started off on their journey.

"So what do I need to do at the Moonstone?"

"I've never gone personally, but Moonwhisker told me that all you have to do is press your nose to the stone and StarClan will come to you." Skypaw nodded but she could tell he was nervous, she was too. *But I have to be strong for him, I am his future leader.*

The walk was long, but they soon approached the Spirit Woods. The trees were glowing in the faint moonlight and Riverstorm felt slightly uncomfortable, something about the place was incredibly eerie to her. She felt Skypaw press closer to her, he was clearly nervous as well.

One tree stood out amongst the rest, the Spirit Tree. It's roots twisted away revealing the cavern below. "Stay close." She told Skypaw and stepped into the cumbersome darkness. She felt a chilled air as they ventured into the pitch black tunnel, she could hear Skypaw's panicked breaths behind her, she touched her tail to his pelt to keep him calm.

The padded down the cold cavern and she was met by a blinding light as she faced the shimmering Moonstone. "Its beautiful..." Skypaw breathed out. "I never thought I would see it." Riverstorm anxiously stepped forward. *I waited my whole life for this moment, and I am finally here.*

She looked down at Skypaw. "Go ahead, you first." The timid apprentice padded forward and laid down in front of the stone. He hesitated for just a moment before pressing mus muzzle to the surface of the stone. The moment he did his entire body went still as StarClan pulled him in.

Riverstorm faced the stone herself, laying down and looked at the surface. It seemed as if the entire night sky was trapped inside. She took a deep breath, the noise echoing in the cavern and touched her nose to the Moonstone. She was met with a harsh cold and she slipped into pure blackness.

He body felt completely frozen, as if she had been buried alive in snow. She couldn't move and she wasn't even sure she was breathing. *What's happening to me?* Riverstorm tried to move, but her body wouldn't budge. *StarClan help me!* She started to panic, but her body would not give.

As she was panicking more and more, she felt warmth flow into her body and felt paws on her. "Riverstorm! Riverstorm!" Her eyes opened to the panicked face of Skypaw who looked over her. "Y-you weren't breathing."

Did I die? Riverstorm wondered but sat up, she briefly expected to be back in the Spirit Tree but the two of them were in the gathering hollow, it was silent. Riverstorm couldn't help but recall the violent battle that had just taken place here. "Look!" Skypaw exclaimed and motioned towards the sky. Riverstorm looked up and saw the stars seemingly falling from the sky.

The fell in front of the two of them and took the shape of nine cats, all of who Riverstorm recognized. Her heart filled with pain and love as she saw many of the cats she had loved and lost throughout her life. "Welcome, Riverstorm and Skypaw." It seemed as if all the voices of StarClan spoke at once, she could see Skypaw was very nervous.

Riverstorm's heart ached as Moonwhisker stepped forward, seeing her sister back to her original beauty filled her with such love. "Moonwhisker I--"

Moonwhisker gently shushed her. "There will be time for words later, sister." She looked at Skypaw. "For now, I would like to start with you." Skypaw forced his head high, clearly trying to look bigger and braver. "Being a medicine cat takes a lot of courage, patience and wisdom. You have already proven that you are worthy of a true medicine cat name by stepping forward and taking on this extensive role. I, and the other medicine cats of StarClan, will take great pride in training you, but first you need your true medicine cat name."

"I, Moonwhisker, former medicine cat of AshClan call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. Though he may not have trained to be a medicine cat, I know he has the heart of one." Skypaw swallowed nervously, but faced Moonwhisker. "Skypaw, do you promise to uphold the ways of a medicine cat, to stand apart from rivalry between Clan and Clan and to protect all cats equally, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." His words carried weight, but Riverstorm knew he meant them.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your true name as a medicine cat. Skypaw, from this day forward you will be known as

Skyfeather. StarClan honors your courage and sacrifice to take on this role and I welcome you as a full medicine cat of AshClan."

Moonwhisker touched her muzzle to Skyfeather's forehead and he licked her shoulder in return. "Thank you, Moonwhisker." Skyfeather bowed his head and stepped back and Moonwhisker turned her attention to Riverstorm.

"Now, it is your turn Riverstorm. It is time that you receive your nine lives and become AshClan's true leader." Moonwhikser padded up to her, she felt so overwhelmed at her sister's prescanse. "With this life I give you compassion. Never forget to look at your Clanmates with love and kindness, they are the heart of your Clan and they will help you lead this Clan into a bright future."

Moonwhisker touched her nose to Riverstorm's and her body was wracked with a fiery wave of pain that nearly took her breath away, she felt the fierce burning of anger and hatred only for it to slowly ebb away with the feeling of love and kindness. Riverstorm was left breathless. "That--that hurt."

"Each life will feel different, but you can handle it." Moonwhisker purred. "I am so proud of you." She stepped back to the line and the cat that took her place was Sharptongue, the elder that had been killed by Thornstar.

"It feels a bit weird to be doing this, but I want to see my Clan rise again so I am happy to give you this life, Riverstorm." Sharptongue had always been ill-tempered, but Riverstorm was glad to have his support. "With this life I give you stubbornness, sometimes that skill can help you. Use it when you need to stand strong and don't let any cat make you fall." He touched hus muzzle to hers and she felt a sensation of annoyance and frustration, but it soon faded away.

"Thank you." She mewed to Sharptongue and the tom returned to the line. The next cat up was Mistypool, Riverstorm's mother. It had been so long since she had seen her mother's face. *What does she think of me? After everything that happened.*

"Hello my daughter, oh how I've missed you." Mistypool purred.

"I've missed you too." As Riverstorm breathed in her mother's scent she felt a sense of familiarity and for a moment she was a kit again. "With this life I give you a mother's love. You never had kits of your own, so I want you to protect this Clan with the love that a mother has for her kits." Mistypool touched her nose to Riverstorm's and she felt a violent, agonizing shock of pain.

She let out a gasp and nearly fell to the ground. She felt love, but on a scale unlike any other. She felt a violent sense of protection for her Clanmates, after everything they had gone through she wanted to give them nothing but happiness and love. Mistypool stepped back and Riverstorm was finally able to talk a breath. "It's a powerful force, isn't it?" Mistypool gave Riverstorm one final comforting touch of her muzzle before returning, her place was taken by Ivystar.

"It's nice to see you here, Riverstorm. I'll admit I used to worry about your ambition but I know that your loss and experiences have shaped you into a strong warrior, you've come a long way and that's why with this life I give you pride. Take pride in your experiences, you have grown and worked so hard. Just don't like your pride turn into arrogance."

Ivystar stepped forward and touched her muzzle to Riverstorm's. This life was energizing, as she felt a sense of pride over herself. *I did work hard for this.* It didn't last very long and Ivystar stepped back. "Good luck, Riverstorm." She turned back and Riverstorm now faced her father.

"I knew I would see you as leader someday," Jayclaw mewed. "But I have some regrets, I treated your sister unfairly and I shouldn't have. I wish I could have been a better father to you three, so allow me to make up to you this way. With this life I give you strength, use it to fight through any battle you my face and come out on top."

Jayclaw pressed his muzzle to hers and she felt a sensation of fear weighing on her shoulders, but it was soon overcome with a sensation of strength and bravery. Jayclaw gave her a respectful nod and returned. Next up Silverstripe, Riverstorm's original mentor. *That feels like such a different time in my life.*

"I know you struggled when I died, but I do want you to know that I am proud of the warrior you became, but hopefully with this life, you will finally listen to me. With this life I give you patience, think before you act, it could save lives."

With this life, Riverstorm felt the frustration of wanting to act and not being able to, it was incredibly frustrating but as with her other lives, it faded away. "Thank you, Silverstripe." Riverstorm mewed quietly. "I wish I could've been a better apprentice to you."

"There's no need to worry about that now. I know you'll do great." Silverstripe returned to the line-up and the next cat nearly broke Riverstorm's heart. It was Batpaw, just as young and energetic as she remembered.

Upon looking at him she nearly fell apart. "Oh, Batpaw." She cried. "I'm so sorry, I failed you--"

Batpaw shook his head. "You didn't do anything wrong, Riverstorm." He waved his tail. "I was very lucky to have you as my mentor and I miss you a lot but I have no regrets. I'm giving you a life so you never forget your sense of adventure, have fun and explore. Remember the joys of being an apprentice out of the camp for the first time."

Riverstorm had to lower her head slightly to reach his muzzle and when she did she was sent a rush of excitement, one she had often felt *with* Batpaw. The sense of joy, excitement and adventure. "Thank you, Batpaw." She mewed to her former apprentice. "I will never forget this life, or you."

"I'll always be with you, Riverstorm. I promise." Batpaw quickly padded back to the lineup and next was Lionstar, Riverstorm's best friend.

"I'm glad that you are taking my place as leader, I wouldn't trust any other cat to bring this Clan back from the brink of destruction. Our friendship was so important to me and that's why with this life I give you friendship. Use it to build bonds and friendships with all the cats in your Clan, just as we did." Lionstar's life was also reassuring, she felt the joys she had spent with him, the closeness

they felt. "Usually the leader that preceded you would give the last life, but everyone knew who it needed to be from."

Lionstar turned around Goldenstar rose to her feet, she gave her son a respectful nod and padded over to Riverstorm. "I knew from the moment that I found you out in the forest that you would be leading this Clan some day. It wasn't quite the straight forward path I pictured, but it's one that you worked hard. You didn't become leader because you deserved it, you became leader because you *earned it* and I am very proud of you."

"Thank you, Goldenstar." Riverstorm bowed her head. "This has always been my dream, and I am proud to have been your apprentice and Clanmate."

Goldenstar's eyes glowed. "With this life I give you determination. Never give up on your goals, you need to fight until you are exhausted to get what you want, fight for your Clan and fight for yourself but never turn your back on them." Goldenstar leaned forward and touched her muzzle to Riverstorm's.

With this life, Riverstorm was filled with the despair of wanting to give up, of feeling lost and hopeless but it eventually faded into a powerful burst of energy and drive. *This is Goldenstar's determination.* Goldenstar stepped back, her eyes shimmering with pride.

She raised her voice and began speaking, her powerful voice casting across the entire forest. "I hail you by your new name, Riverstar. Your old life is no more. You have now received the nine lives of a leader and I grant you guardianship of AshClan. Defend it well; care for young and old; honor your ancestors and the traditions of the warrior code; live each life with pride and dignity."

"Riverstar! Riverstar! Riverstar!" The cats of StarClan cheered her brand new name, and Riverstar felt a surge of energy. *I've wanted this name for so long. I've worked hard, I've lost loved ones and made many mistakes, but I can now move forward and grow with the rest of my Clan. The future is bright, and not just mine, but all of AshClan's future.*